

THE CLYFFARDS OF CLYFFE



BY THE AUTHOR OF "LOST SIR MASSINGBERD"

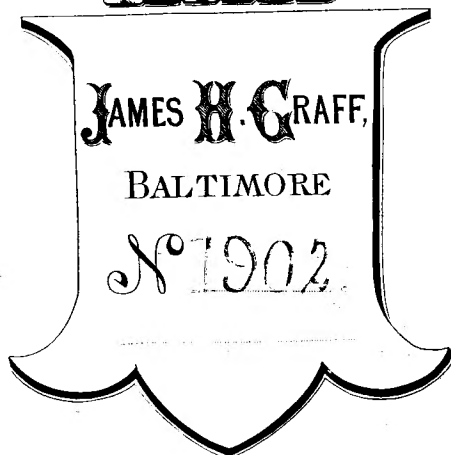
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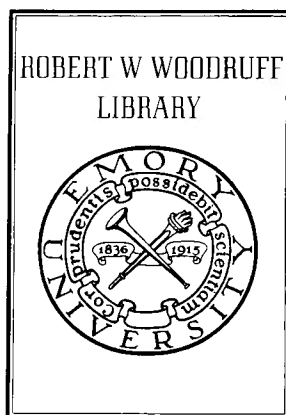
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THE
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THE AUTHOR OF
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ETC., ETC.

NEW EDITION.

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THE CLYFFARDS OF CLYFFE.

CHAPTER I.

IN CRAVEN.

"WHO travels by Donnerblick Scars, takes a bad road," runs a local proverb in Craven ; and, like most proverbs, it contains a half truth. The cart-track is, in fact, so wretched, that it has no right to the name of road, especially too, since in the winter-time it is not used by man at all, but is in the sole occupation of a mountain torrent. Such being the case even at this present, when Craven (British, *Craigvan*, "District of Rocks") is the summer haunt of tourists, demanding to be *carried* everywhere in wheeled conveyances, we may imagine it was no better in the year of grace 1820. At that very date, however, and somewhere about midnight in September, two travellers might have been seen (for luckily for them there was a moon) essaying that ill-reputed way in a gig. Western Yorkshire, as geographers are aware, does not fringe the sea-coast, and yet upon the left hand of the wayfarers arose a wall of cliff, as sheer and massive as any which opposes itself to ocean ; scattered fragments of rock, too, similar to those which are found on the sea-beach, strewed the track, and in such numbers as to be

unavoidable. What there was of roadway, independent of these, was a natural limestone pavement, with fissures in it at unequal intervals. The vehicle, one would have thought, must have been made of boxwood at least to have resisted such continuous shocks ; and how the springs stood, would have been a marvel to such as were unacquainted with the fact that the gig had no springs.

"Now, Cator, pull up, and let me out, cried one of the inmates, after a concussion which made every timber in the homely conveyance rattle and creak. "I'd rather get along upon all-fours, if that be necessary, than sit through another jolt like that. Come, let me out, I say."

The tone was that of would-be determination, that mixture of peremptoriness and conciliation, which is the certain index of a dependent mind. The reply was equally significant of a disposition dogged and obstinate, not easily moulded to another's hand, but once being so, fitted to be its instrument for bad or good, without much scruple.

"Sit where ye be, I say. My orders were, I was never to lose hold on ye, for that ye were unfitted to walk alone."

"But look you, Sirrah—— Thunder, what a bump ! I protest I thought my collar-bone was broken. How dare you talk to me in that fashion ? Am not I your master, Sir ? "

"Ay, ay, that's like enough ; but my orders come from the master of both of us. Sit you *down*, I say ; " and the driver seized the other's wrist, as he strove to rise, and forced him down with iron grip on to the seat again.

"Well, upon my word, this is pretty treatment," observed the victim querulously ; "it really is, Cator. Why, you couldn't treat me much worse if I was one of the patients."

"Well," cried the driver, slapping his thigh, "but that is a good one ; couldn't treat you much worse !" Here he laughed so loud and harshly, that the mountain-walls were forced, though sullenly enough, to re-echo his cheerless mirth. "Ah, Mr. Clement Carr, but I think I could."

"Don't laugh like that," exclaimed his companion, earnestly; "don't do it; pray don't; and don't talk of such things. My brother said we were never to talk of them, even to one another."

"Ah, did he?" replied the man that was called Cator, in a sobered tone. "Well, then, I ax his pardon. Mr. Gideon is a knowing one, he is, else what could be the harm of talking about any mortal thing on Donnerblick Scars at midnight, with nobody but the devil—who knows all about *us* already, I reckon—within hearing, is more than I can tell, and devilish funny."

"Cator, be quiet, I say," interrupted Mr. Carr almost with a scream. "Don't speak of anything dreadful like that; and don't swear—for Heaven's sake don't swear—until we come to the turnpike road."

"Then I shall talk like a parson to the end of this journey, that's certain, Mr. Clement. There is no turnpike, or anything like it, between this and Clyffe Hall. Why, you're never satisfied; you ain't. You didn't like the moor-track, as we came along, any better, just because it was a little slushy-like."

"It was a quagmire," answered the other, shuddering at the bare recollection; "it was a shaking, quaking swamp."

"Ay, and I know who was a shaking, quaking summut else," replied the other, maliciously. "Just in that 'ere place, when I was a-telling you that pretty story about the young woman and her sweetheart, who was lost in that very quag years and years ago, and was dug out since, only the other day, as one might say, all fresh and pleasant, only a trifle browned with the peat, and all of a sudden we plumped in up to the axles—my life, didn't you turn a pretty colour!"

Again Mr. Cator relieved his feelings by peal after peal of discordant laughter, and again the unwilling rocks returned his mirth.

"This is truly horrible," observed Mr. Clement Carr, as he clung in an agony of terror to the side rail of the gig which was now descending a sort of precipice—"to travel such a road as this in company with such a man!"

He spoke in a tone of pious reprobation, such as would have galled most people clothed with any remnant of self-respect. But Mr. Cator, who had long parted with his last rag, only laughed the more. "Well, of all the lily-livered chaps as ever I came across, strike me blind—but you are ——"

"Don't," groaned the other, the image of his companion, sightless, immediately presenting itself before him. "There's lightning in the air. Pray don't. How should I ever find my way alone out of this howling wilderness?"

"Ay, howling it is," rejoined the driver, looking over the shoulder grimly at his unconscious companion—a short but corpulent man of middle age, who might be termed "gentleman," so far as a new suit of black broad-cloth and a decent hatband could carry him towards that social elevation, "you never spoke a truer word than that, Mr. Clement. Have you not heard strange sounds ever since we passed the Kirkstane, like the rushing and rolling of thunder?"

"Yes, Cator, yes. I thought—and hoped—it was only a sort of singing in my own ears. What is it, my good friend?—what on earth is it?"

"It's nothing on earth, Mr. Clement," responded the other gravely; "it's the waters underneath us on their way to Hell Gates."

"Heaven forgive me, the man's gone mad!" ejaculated the stout man, the thin red lines which were his lips growing white with fear.

"Well, and what if I *was* mad, Mr. Clement?" pursued the other with a leer. "You would know how to quiet me, I suppose, as well as any man except Mr. Gideon; that is to say, you would if you had me at the Dene, although here, perhaps, I should rather have the advantage of you, being the more powerful of the two. My life, but it would be a pretty game if you were to be paid out for all your tricks in that very way! Think of one of those poor wretches whom we have left behind us yonder catching you here alone, under the harvest-moon, and settling his long account against you, for ——"

"You're not to talk about it, Cator; you're not to talk

about it," interrupted the other piteously; "and besides, we do it all for their good; and if I do but get safe home, it shall never be done again, so help me—it never shall!"

"Well, you are a clever one," observed the driver, admiringly, "and you've a certain pluck about you—that I will say, although you are such an everlasting coward. Now, to think of your attempting to gammon Providence in that way! It's a cut above *me*, and that's a fact. I shouldn't have the face to set about it. Why, you know as well as I do that if you only get safe out of this bad road and indifferent company, and once find yourself in clover again at the Dene, you'll be worse than ever; for won't you be taking it out of them as is left, for all the terrors you have suffered in bringing this news of 'our dear lamented friend as has exchanged our 'umble guardianship for a place where we are assured even yet more tender care will be taken of him!'" The sanctimonious snuffle with which these last words were delivered, proclaimed them at once to be a quotation from Mr. Clement Carr himself, whose ordinary speech, when not under the influence of alarm, it really rather happily parodied. So delighted, at all events, was Mr. Cator with the success of the imitation, that he indulged himself with another of his joyless screeches. This was duly reverberated, as usual, with the addition of a curious humming sound not discernible in the original. "There," observed Mr. Cator, triumphantly; "that's what comes of trying to gammon Providence. There's Hell Gates a-biling."

"I trust the ground may not open," ejaculated the stout man, piously—"I only trust the ground mayn't open with using such wicked words."

"But that's the very thing it's a-going to do," returned the other with a sneer; "so what's the use of trusting? Here we are, look, at the very edge of Boden Pot—otherwise called Hell Gates—and it's a sight to be seen. Ain't the ground just opened with a vengeance, eh, Mr. Clement?"

Upon the right-hand side of the cart-track, and sepa-

rated from it by no fence of any kind, gaped a huge elliptical chasm, far down in which the unseen water was bubbling and simmering, as though it indeed did boil.

"Would you not like to step out now, and just crane over a bit?" inquired the last speaker, maliciously, pulling the powerful black mare he drove so suddenly up, that she reared within a few feet of the frightful cavity. "Why, darned if the man isn't shutting his eyes!—shutting his eyes, but moving his lips. Why, you ain't a gammoning. Providence *again*, surely! There, that's right; take a good long look at it. People come from miles away, and spend a deal o' money to see Boden Pot, even when it ain't a-biling as it is to-night. But you're in luck, you are."

If Mr. Clement Carr, part-proprietor of that famous asylum for the nobility and gentry of aberrated intellect, called the Dene, Yorkshire, was in luck upon the present occasion, his countenance exhibited no vulgar triumph, or even complacency. In fact if we had not had the word of the veracious Mr. Cator to the contrary, one would have pronounced him to have been in the worst luck conceivable, so abject was his appearance, as, clinging to his favourite rail, and bowing his whole weight on the side of the gig most remote from the object of his terrors, he regarded the curious natural phenomenon thus presented to his notice.

"I was born and bred in Craven myself," continued the keeper—for such was the position which the driver of the vehicle occupied when at the Dene—"and yet I have never seen this sight but once before. There must have been a deal of rain on the moors of late, that's certain. There's always rain enough, of course; for all the underground rivers as you have heard a-rushing beneath you—the singing in your ears, as you called it—empty themselves here. But as for biling, that's rare."

"I have quite satisfied my curiosity, Cator," observed Mr. Carr in a hollow voice, and speaking with no little difficulty, on account of a tendency of his tongue to cleave to the roof of his mouth.

"Very good, Sir," replied the other with mock respect.

"I am sure your wish is my law ; only, Mr. Gideon said I was to take the greatest care of this here mare ; and she's come a long way and wants rest ; and here's a nice bit of level ground—there's not much of it in Craven—as seems to be put a-purpose for her to rest upon. I'm sure you wouldn't be cruel to animals, Mr. Clement ; cruelty is something totally foreign to your nature ; 'our system is opposed to violence of all description,' " here he snuffled again, "so let us bide a bit, and wait for the Boggart."

"The Boggart !" whispered Mr. Clement, hoarsely, casting an apprehensive glance about him for an instant, and then refixing his gaze upon the chasm, as though fascinated by its horrid depths, "what is the Boggart ? "

"When I have lit my pipe," returned Mr. William Cator, suiting the action to the word, "I shall be delighted to give you all the information in my power. What a (puff, whiff) fortunate man you are to visit Craven for the first time with a guide like me."

CHAPTER II.

POST-MORTEM ADVENTURE OF MR. GUY CLYFFARD.

"THE Boggart," commenced Mr. William Cator, calmly, "is what is more generally known as the Devil ; but while he is in these parts, he goes by the former name, as a sort of territorial title. When he is not elsewhere, hereabouts—at Staynton Hole, Ribbleside Pit (which you should see by-the-bye), or Withgill Wells, all country seats of his in these parts—he is sure to be in Boden Pot. See how white the water churns down yonder, just where the moon catches it, like the froth on a madman's lips. One hundred and eighty feet sheer, they say, Mr. Clement, from where the rank grass ceases to grow ; and there, at the very edge, do you see a footprint deep in the stone, with the toes pointing *downwards*?"

Following the direction of the speaker's finger, his companion could just discover a bare spot, something of the shape of a human foot. The suggestion of a fellow-creature having ever stood in such a position might have sent a chill to a bolder heart than Mr. Carr's.

"I see, I see—it is too frightful," answered he, hastily ; "it looks like certain death."

"I should think it did," remarked Mr. Cator, drily ; "and it would have been death, too, if the man had not been dead already"

"Dead already?" echoed the other. "How could a dead man plant a footstep like that?"

"Ah! how, indeed, Mr. Clement? You must ask the judge before whom the case was tried a century and half ago. Now, think of your not knowing that, and you a relative by marriage of the party in question! I don't mean the Boggart—although I *have* seen you under circumstances when you might have passed for own brother to *him*—but Guy Clyffard of Clyffe, an ancestor of the very man whose sudden and deplorable death——"

"Heaven is my witness that could not be helped," interrupted his companion earnestly. "He brought it upon himself, Cator. It was a question of his life or ours. Don't you think the mare is sufficiently rested, my good friend? The moon is sinking; it is getting sensibly darker."

"Did not I *say* 'sudden and deplorable,' Mr. Clement? Why, you could not have caught me up more sharply, if I had hinted at a crowner's 'quest. Guy Clyffard, then, was a far-away ancestor, although in the direct line, of our late lamented friend and patient; and if there had been such an establishment as the Dene in those days, ought most certainly to have been placed there under—what is our phrase?—judicious moral restraint. But there was no benevolent institution of the kind then extant, and so this mad fellow went at large. I can't tell you what he did, or rather what he did not do, to make Satan his friend, but it is certain he brought the curse upon the Clyffards. There's an ugly story about his having left a mother and child in the caves under Ribble forest yonder, to find their way out by themselves; but at all events, he was not a moral character, like you and me. He married a queer wife, too. The Clyffards have often done that, although it is only of late years that they have married beneath them—nay, don't be angry, Mr. Clement; I mean no offence to Miss Grace as was—but in that respect Guy Clyffard outdid them all. No pair were ever so cordially hated as they by the whole Fell-side. Well, after a pretty long lease of life, and having sowed his full crop of tares, as a parson would say, the Squire fell sick, and was not expected to recover. About that time,

on a certain day in June, one Mr. Howarth (his family live in Thorpdale yet) was otter-hunting in Boden Beck—it breaks into the open both above and below the Pot here, and is still famed for otters—and there was a matter of four-and-twenty folks with him on foot and on horseback. While they were at check, not a hundred yards from where we are standing now, a couple of men came running up the Fell with exceeding swiftness.

“ ‘These be well winded,’ said Howarth to his huntsman; ‘never did I see men run so fast before.’ ”

“ ‘Why, Heaven save us! the one in grey is Squire Guy Clyffard,’ replied the huntsman. ‘And who is he in black that follows him so close?’ ”

“But nobody answered that, although all the hunt had got their eyes fixed upon the advancing pair. They ran on at headlong speed right towards the Pot (it was not called Hell Gates *then*), and Guy’s face looked like a hunted hare’s they said, so it is like he knew who was behind him; then he fled down the cleft, though all cried out to him to stop, and into the yawning gulf, as if for shelter, and that was his last footstep which is printed there. There was no other mark or sign, though the man in black took the same road. Clyffard’s Leap they sometimes call it. There was no more otter-hunting after that; but Howarth goes straight home, and tells his wife he is sure the Squire is dead, for he has just seen him chased by the devil into Boden Pot. And sure enough he had breathed his last in Clyffe Hall at that very time. You may suppose how this was talked of over all the Fell-side; so much so, that Madam Clyffard, the widow, brought her action against Mr. Howarth for publishing the scandal that he had seen her deceased husband driven into hell; and the defence set up was this, *that he had so seen him*. She laid the damages at five thousand pounds. It was tried before Judge Bolthby, at York, in 1687. The witnesses for Madam were the doctor and other two, who had been with the Squire when he died. He had refused to go to bed, and insisted upon being dressed in a new grey hunting-suit, in which to take the field the moment he felt better. But Howarth, on his

part, had his four-and-twenty men, of whom the huntsman and many others swore to the very buttons on the said suit, which they had observed were covered with the same sort of cloth whereof the coat was made. It was impossible to resist such testimony ; and the judge gave into it like the rest. 'Lord have mercy upon me !' said he, 'and grant I may never see what you have seen : one or two may be mistaken, but five-and-twenty cannot be mistaken.' So Madam Clyffard lost her cause."

"But the Boggart!" exclaimed Mr. Clement, enthralled, despite his terrors, by this singular narrative.

"Well, the Boggart has haunted Boden ever since. Do you see these stones, as large as eggs, which he has cast up from the water in his rage ; and listen, you will hear him cursing to himself far down in the depths of Hell Gates."

The bubbling and boiling had by this time subsided, but as the pair listened attentively, a dull, monotonous sound—doubtless the glutting of the swollen pool against the rock—could be distinctly heard. The two men listened for a little in total silence, then "Come up, mare—come up," ejaculated Mr. William Cator ; "master has had enough of the Boggart."

Master had had so much of him that he never spoke a word until the dark and perilous way lay well behind them, and they were moving swiftly along upon what was by comparison a level road.

"Are there no more boulders, or underground rivers, or Pots, William?" inquired Mr. Clement Carr, with assumed carelessness.

"Nothing more, Sir," replied his companion, with some tinge of conventional respect apparent in his tones for the first time. "I thought you would think it rather a wild journey over them Fells."

"If I ever come that accursed road again," exclaimed Mr. Clement, breathing very hard, and shaking his fist in the direction from which they came, "may the fiend in truth fly away with me, as those otter-hunting fools fancied they saw him——"

"I say," interrupted Mr. William Cator, checking his

steed for the second time, "just you take care what you're talking about."

"Why? where? what?" interrogated the other, apprehensively. "You told me that there was nothing more to be alarmed at."

"Don't you go making a jest in the place we're coming to of what happened to Guy Clyffard, Mr. Clement. The Clyffards are an old family, and hug their traditions after a fashion which you mayn't understand. They're particularly proud, I believe, of the ancestor who brought the curse upon them. If he didn't go downward by way of Boden Pot, it is certain that he took some other road to the same place: but it was a fine thing, and a compliment to the Clyffards to be fetched by the Prince of Darkness."

"I am sure they are welcome to any superstitions they please," observed the other with a grating laugh. "Folly of that sort is always a step in the right direction, and I trust that one member of the family, at least, may always qualify himself for a residence at the Dene."

"Ay, you may call it superstition, Mr. Clement Carr; but if you had lived boy and man for a quarter of a century within a mile of Clyffe Hall, you would not be so glib with your tongue."

"You are an ignorant and uneducated man, Cator," returned the other loftily, "and therefore such credulity, fostered by local prejudice, is in your case only natural."

"Very good, Mr. Clement," answered the other drily. "Perhaps we shall differ less about this matter to-morrow morning."

"Why to-morrow morning less than now, my good Cator?" inquired the other, with an air of careless patronage.

"Because you will have slept upon it, Sir, which is said to often alter a man's opinion, and more especially as you will have done so in Clyffe Hall."

"But there's nothing against the Hall, my good Cator, is there? Mrs. Clyffard has never breathed a syllable of anything unpleasant?"

"Nothing, Sir, nothing, except those tales which

'credulity, fostered by local prejudice,' is so apt to invent, and which 'ignorant and uneducated' folks are so ready to believe.—But yonder is Clyffe Hall itself: we shall have a couple of hours' sleep before daybreak yet, if we push on."

"I shall not go to bed to-night," said Mr. Clement Carr decisively; "it would scarcely be worth while."

Mr. William Cator chuckled aloud.

"And look you, Cator, perhaps our staying in the house may be looked upon as an intrusion at this period of family affliction. To-morrow night we will sleep at the inn."

"There is no inn, Mr. Clement," returned the driver maliciously. "Here are the lodge gates; please to hold the reins, while I get out and ring the bell."

CHAPTER III.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

It was the quietest hour of the twenty-four, as we in our egotism are wont to speak, as though it were not far otherwise with the majority of our fellow-creatures on this orb, and busy midday with our own flesh and blood in the under world. The high harvest-moon at full was flooding the silent woods with mellow light, and crowning the eternal hills with solemn splendour. Through the iron gates, the avenue stretched far and wide, and the broad oaks threw each a shadow of itself on the eastern sward, as perfect as though it were a cast mantle. At the end of the long vista rose the midmost tower of Clyffe Hall; and on both sides, beyond the trees, vast masses of the stately mansion, or at least of its girdling terrace, could be seen, sleeping in the moonbeams like some enchanted pile of fairyland. Around it spread the park, wooded and knowled, the ferny couching-place of many an antlered herd; and behind it, as far as eye could range, rose the dark background of Ribble Forest and Fell. It was a scene to make the lightest-hearted thoughtful, and yet, if viewed aright, to lighten the burden of the most sorrowful. It matters not which sort beholds it, or if neither does. Autumn after autumn, age after age, the innocent night wears still this precious jewel of the harvest moon upon her brow; and the soft effulgence overflows the world, and steepes it in heavenly splendour, whether mortals care to mark it or no; as the Urim and Thummim shone the

same, whether he who looked upon them perceived the presence of the Lord of Hosts, or only beheld a burnished breastplate.

Alike upon the crowded towns it shines, where the children of honest labour sleep unconscious of it, and those of vice flaunt in the streets unheedful of it ; as upon the lonely desolate moorlands, where there is none to gaze upon its lavish sheen. Whatever it bathes in its mild radiance, straight grows fair, except the faces of the wicked. Fat and afraid, irresolute and cruel, Clement Carr sat in the springless gig looking like a vulgar Vitellius. The countenance of Mr. William Cator, also, who did not contrive to awaken the lodge-keeper (although he hung on to the bell as though he were taking part in a bob major) with his first, nor yet his second summons, was harsh and grim as the stone deer-hounds that sat on either side the portal. When the gates were opened at last, he lashed the mare into a gallop, as though she had been the cause of their long detention. Still, even these men, as they emerged from the double line of oaks, standing like sentinels whose officer of the watch was time itself, and beheld the various proportions of the castle (for such in truth it was), each significant of its epoch, but harmonised one with the other by the revolving years—even these men, I say, could not restrain a characteristic outburst of admiration. It was not, indeed, the picturesqueness of this edifice, girt by its broad black belt the sleeping moat, and far less any of the historical associations which might have hallowed it from turret to basement to some folks, that claimed their regard, but the more practical consideration of how considerable an income the proprietor of such a domain must needs possess, who could keep it in such due order and repair ; for old as Clyffe Hall was, there was not a vestige of ruin about it ; the lawns that sloped down to the moat-side were smoothly shorn, and set with banks of flowers ; and from the stone terrace above them, faced with fruit-trees, came news of a trim rose garden, in every odorous breath of the cool autumn air.

“Fine place, Cator,” observed Mr. Carr, as they drove

over the stone bridge, but thinly covered with ivy, which only of late years had replaced the less convenient draw-bridge. He spoke not only approvingly but with a certain air of part proprietorship, which did not escape his companion's attention.

"Very true, Mr. Clement," returned he. "It's been in the family in one shape or another more than five hundred years. They say it grew to this, bit by bit, from a single tower—that to the west, I think it was, where the walls are sixteen feet thick, and the windows mere holes with bars to them—wonderfully convenient for *our* little business, eh, Mr. Clement? But these great places don't change hands very readily. You may smile in your mischievous way, and Miss Grace, as was, is doubtless a very clever woman; but the Clyffards of Clyffe—Strike me blind, but that's the bloodhounds! Well, I own it made my heart go pit-a-pat. Did you ever hear such a howling in your life? It really seemed as though they had overheard us, and guessed what we were thinking of. Them very bloodhounds, or leastways their fathers before them, have been here these three hundred years. Not even a puppy, they say, has ever been parted with by the family; only a full-grown one was killed by the king's order, or something like it, for eating the gatekeeper's child in Squire Guy's time. He swore it was such a piece of tyranny as he would never put up with; but the dog was hung for all that; and the story goes that his master buried him in the chapel yonder, and got excommunicated by his priests for so doing. Hang the dogs! I hope their chains are strong! Well, it's one way of rousing the house, at all events."

The feelings of Mr. Clement Carr (who sat on the side next the kennel) did not admit of articulate speech; but he got down with much more agility than could have been expected of a gentleman of his proportions, and running round the back of the gig, applied himself to the iron knocker of the nail-studded front door with a will. The courtyard in which they now were was formed by three sides of the castle, which stared upon them from a score of curtained

windows, as from sightless eyes ; but through both shutter and curtain of one of them gleamed a pale and sickly light, telling of wakefulness and watching even at that slumberous hour.

"That is Squire Ralph's own chamber," observed Mr. Cator, nodding cautiously in the direction in question ; and if you'll take the advice of so humble an individual as myself, you will not make such a dreadful noise."

The shocks which Mr. Carr was administering to the oaken door did indeed reverberate over the whole building ; and the baying of the bloodhounds, mixed with the rattle of chains as they strained to break their bonds, made up a hideous clamour. The latter noise, however, only incited Mr. Clement to fresh exertions ; and when the door was suddenly opened in front of him, he rushed frantically in, crying, "The dogs, the dogs ! Shut it, lock it ; never mind Cator !" without even casting a glance at the person who had admitted him. If his alarm had permitted him to do so, it would probably have taken another direction.

He who stood in the doorway, glancing in speechless indignation from the intruder in the gig to him who had made so unceremonious an entrance, was evidently no serving-man. His face, though baggard, and, at the moment, puckered with rage, wore an air of conscious superiority very different from the well-weighed superciliousness of a hall-porter ; while his apparel, although dishevelled, as though he had sought repose (as indeed he had) without undressing, was rich, and even elegant. But what rendered him most peculiar, and put it out of the question that he could be merely a retainer of the establishment, was that he wore his hair, of which he had an enormous quantity, notwithstanding that he was far advanced in years, in plaits, as race-horses do in these days, and from out of them his grey face peered inquiringly, as a river-god's is sometimes pictured to do from his fell of bulrushes.

"How dare you make this clamour at my door ?" he broke forth after a while. "Who are you, fellow, in the

gig, and who is this cur whom you have brought with you ? ”

His inquiry was addressed to Mr. William Cator, but referred to Mr. Clement Carr, who, having climbed up to the huge marble mantelpiece of the hall by means of a chair, had cleverly kicked it over, so as to isolate himself from all attacks of bloodhounds or others ; and there he sat, with his legs swinging from the impetus of his exertions, but by no means from the careless confidence which sometimes begets that motion in persons similarly circumstanced.

“ My name is Cator, Sir,” returned the driver, baring his head, and speaking with unwonted humility. “ We have just come over from the Dene.”

“ I might have known it,” muttered Ralph Clyffard gravely, for it was the Squire of Clyffe Hall himself who stood before them. “ Have I not been forewarned these three times ? ”—Then he added aloud, “ Come in, Sirrah ; a groom will take your horse. When did my poor brother Cyril die ? ”

“ We regret to say, Sir,” quoth Mr. Clement Carr from the mantelpiece—“ I speak for Gideon and myself—that the sudden and deplorable demise of Cyril Clyffard, Esq., took place yesterday afternoon at twenty-seven minutes and a half exactly to four o’clock.”

“ Come down, Sir, and tell your tidings in a fitting manner ! ” cried Ralph Clyffard in a terrible voice. “ Could no messenger be found to bring such evil news to Clyffe Hall less like an ape than this ? ”

Thus adjured, but by no means displaying the nimbleness of the animal to which he had been likened, Mr. Clement descended from his post of vantage.

“ The poor gentleman had had paroxysms for nearly a week, Sir. His unhappy malady——”

“ Stop ! ” thundered the master of the house ; “ not another word if you value your life. Rupert, my son, what is it ? ”

The change in Ralph Clyffard’s tone, as he spoke the last few words, was like a summer south wind after a tornado. He addressed them to a youth of about

eighteen, who had just entered the hall with a lamp in his hand ; he had a dressing-gown loosely cast about him, as though he had just left his couch, and his large blue eyes wandered wildly and inquiringly from his father to the strangers. Accompanying him was another lad about a year his junior, whose appearance afforded a singular contrast to that of the former. They were both well-favoured, but whereas the elder was a true young Saxon, auburn-haired and ruddy, with the silver down upon his cheek already turning to golden, the younger might have been born under an Italian sky, so dark and passionate his eyes, so bronzed his face from brow to pointed chin.

"I was waked by the knocking, father," replied the youth who was called Rupert ; "and Ray said he was sure he heard voices in the hall ; and so Ray and I——"

"Will go quietly to bed again," interrupted a woman's voice with quiet decision.

The speaker had entered noiselessly by some door in that part of the great hall which lay in shadow, so that it was impossible to say how long she might have been there. But she now glided forward into the full light of the moonbeams—really a wonderful vision. She was a blonde, such as might well have been Rupert's mother, but that she was much too young—about eight-and-twenty at most—yet she had no likeness to the boy beyond that of complexion, while her expression was singularly different. In Rupert's eyes there was a look of indecision, of vacillation, almost painful to contemplate ; while those of the lady shone clear and steadfast as a star. Her mouth, too, was firm and resolute, although when she smiled, this did not mar its sweetness ; and her voice, though somewhat incisive, was clear and musical as a struck stalactite.

"Both to bed, my good lads," continued she ; "these persons are not robbers, that your assistance is needed ; while whatever news they bring will keep till breakfast-time."

The lads retired, although reluctantly, with their faces to their inexorable step-mother (for such she was) ;

and not until their footsteps had died away along the vaulted stone passage, did she again break silence.

"Cyril is dead, I conclude," said she.

Ralph bowed his head, overcome with sorrowful thought; but when she drew close to him, and placed her fragile hand in his, he carried it to his lips, and kissed it tenderly. As he did so, she, with the air of one to whom sovereign favour is nothing new, inclined graciously towards the messenger.

"How did it happen? Tell me, Clement."

"For these three days past" [the husband and wife exchanged a meaning glance] "the poor gentleman has been getting worse and worse; at last he grew very violent. Gideon visited him as usual yesterday afternoon, and Mr. Clyffard seized the opportunity of the open door to rush out, and cast himself over the well-staircase. He was killed on the spot."

Ralph hid his face, and shuddered.

"That will do," said he; "I will hear more at another time. The servants are now aroused, and will see that you want for nothing. I am sorry that I spoke to you so roughly, Sir;" and with a stately inclination of his head, Ralph Clyffard moved thoughtfully away.

"Why is not Gideon here?" inquired Mrs. Clyffard, her beautiful lips shutting close together, as soon as she had spoken, like a purse with a coral clasp.

"He is hurt," answered Clement shortly. "They had a struggle for it, he and the other."

"I thought so," answered the woman quietly. "He must have been hurt, indeed, not to have come himself. It is very unfortunate."

"Well, I am sure I had rather he had come than I," answered Clement sullenly. "Such a dreadful road as we had to travel, and not much of a welcome at the end of it, from one's own sister. Why, I believe your husband thought at first that I was no more a gentleman than Cator here."

"I dare say he did," returned Mrs. Clyffard drily. "My husband is very peculiar."

"Peculiar!" echoed Mr. Carr. "I think so indeed.

Why, his hair alone is enough to frighten one. He ought to be at the Dene himself; I'm sure he is mad enough."

"Hush!" returned the lady imperatively. "You will have an excellent breakfast, Clement, and whatever you please to call for in Clyffe Hall is at your service; see, then, that you make yourself at home—so well, that you need not remember that you have any other home. Speak not one word about the Dene. You will find attendance yonder."

She shot one look of intelligence towards Cator, which was returned swifter than a shuttlecock, and followed her husband to his chamber.

"That's pretty treatment of a brother," ejaculated Clement, but not until she was well out of earshot. "It is to be hoped that something's coming of it all at last, for I'm sure we've had enough to put up with."

"You have had your revenge, too, Mr. Clement," observed the other grimly.

"*One* has paid for it," answered Vitellius with an ugly look; "but the indebtment is upon the wrong side still. I am longing for the day when we shall cry quits."

"The matter is in good hands," returned the keeper of lunatics; "Miss Grace as was is a clever woman; and in the meantime let us punish the larder."

CHAPTER IV.

AUNT AND NIECE.

THE morning that witnessed the arrival of the messengers from the Dene was many hours older when Mrs. Clyffard sat down to breakfast in her own boudoir, attired in deepest black, and wearing an air, if not of respectful sorrow, at least of serious thought. Through the deep bay-window she could mark from where she sat the golden raiment of the autumn woods of Clyffe, and the windings of its well-stocked stream, from its beginning the thread of pearl, which, like a long necklace, now hid, now seen, upon a maiden's bosom, decked the swelling Fell, down to the far distance, where, a river broad and shining, it yet was lost in the misty plain. Many a mile it ran before her, and all its course was fair; whether with the moorcock and ptarmigan upon the heathery hill, or in the rocky dells of the park, where the gentle does strayed down to know their beauty, or in the broad rich level beyond, white with farms, and yellow with grain. It was the plain which pleased her best, because it was the richest; for it was greed that kindled in Grace Clyffard's eyes, as she gazed upon that lordly scene. All was hers as far as those eyes could range, to live in and be mistress of; but if the proud demesnes of Clyffe had stretched thrice as far, she would have hungered still for more. All was hers, but for her life only—to enjoy, but not to possess. True, she concerned herself with this life alone, credited it alone, never hoped or thought

(although she sometimes dreamed, in spite of herself) of anything beyond it; moreover, she only loved herself, and therefore it could matter nothing into whose hands this wealth should pour, when hers must needs unloose it. Nevertheless, it was that thought which darkened her fair face, and marred her brow, as she gazed forth upon this scene, whose peaceful beauty should have found its own reflection there—to enjoy, but not to possess. “Nay,” answered those tight shut lips, “but that cannot be. I must possess before I can enjoy it.” She beat her little foot against the floor, once, twice, and yet again, but not in passion; whatever stirred the depths of her subtle heart, rarely indeed was evidenced upon the surface. There was one answering rap from beneath, and after an interval, a side-door opened behind her, and a young girl entered the room. Mrs. Clyffard did not even turn her head, but sat with her rapt gaze still fixed upon the view without.

“Breakfast waits, Mildred,” said she thoughtfully. “You are late this morning. Have you heard the news from the Dene?”

“Yes, aunt,” replied the girl. “Mr. Cyril Clyffard is dead.”

“Ay, child; the ground behind us then at least is safe. Madmen are said to become sane men sometimes, and stretch their fettered hands again for what was once their own; but the dead lay claim to nothing. Ralph Clyffard is lord of Clyffe at last. I place my feet firm on the second step; but it is still far to climb.—Do you feel strong, child?”

She did not speak these words as a mother would have done. It was her contemptuous habit to address her niece as “child,” and she used it now mechanically when no contempt was meant.

“I am strong enough, aunt—for a child,” replied Mildred Leigh coldly. “What would you have me do?”

Swift as a snake, the lady of Clyffe turned round and placed her face quite close to that of her niece, as she sat at table, so near that not a quiver of the lip, not a trembling of an eyelid could escape her gaze.

"Listen, Mildred ; you are no fool, although you would fain that I should take you for one. You are not a baby either. Girls have been wooed and won, ay, and been widowed too, before they have reached your age. You know for what those lustrous eyes have been given you—and how to use them. You do not plait that raven hair so cunningly to please yourself alone. Boys like that colour always"—she glanced aside in a mirror, glistening in the oaken panel like floating ice on a dark sea, at her own auburn tresses—"but 'tis the blonde that lasts. You will be grey, child, before me. Your time is short, young as you think yourself—beware lest you misuse it. Look you, because Ralph Clyffard wears his hair like you, and having cellars filled with goodly wine, persists in drinking water from the spring, and lives in a half-dream, through poring on his ancestors, and looking for their curse to fall on him and his, you think perhaps that he himself is mad."

"I, aunt? Nay, not I!"

"Who, then, child? Who has dared to think my husband mad? Your face does not pay compliments. Was he mad to marry *me*?" A twitching at the corner of the girl's mouth—the hint of the beginning of a smile—had brought this question swift as the quivering wire upon a tower draws the lightning. "Well, and what then? Are not all men mad to marry? By Heaven, if I were male, I'd call my house my own, my purse my own; nor would I have children praying for my death, or heirs of any kind. I would not buy the best of wives at such a price. And yet, I suppose, you think there is no man so rich but that he might give both land and gold to make *you* his, and yet be no spendthrift."

"I have never thought about it, aunt," replied Mildred Leigh, colourless as virgin marble before some sculptor who would fain hew it to his purpose. Not a muscle moved, and the long lashes of her eyes drooped down almost as if in slumber.

"You lie—you lie!" returned Mrs. Clyffard, slowly. "Not thought about it, and a girl! Why, girls think of nothing else. Why not confess it, Mildred? You

have some right to value yourself highly. Are you not my niece—the nearest to the Mistress of Clyffe Hall? Are you not a lady born? Can you not paint? Can you not play? Ah, what a lure is there—the rounded arm thrown round the golden harp, the fingers twinkling on the jet-black keys! Can you not sing as any siren can? What would a man have more? But, mark! if you had known none of these fine things, but scarcely could read a line out of a book; or if you could, would have none to listen to you, since all were rude and cultureless about you; your father a boor, dead in a drunken brawl; your mother an evil memory; your brothers hated by all who knew them, and most hated by those who knew them best—driving a base trade basely: if this had been your fortune—as it was *mine*, child—you might have said indeed: ‘Should any man of rank and wealth—let alone a Clyffard, the proudest and the richest in all the country-side—propose to marry me, and take me from this sordid roof, and make me mistress of his ancestral home, he surely must be mad.’ So, niece, when I saw you smile, or thinking of a smile just now, when I said, ‘Was he mad to marry *me*?’ I was neither angered nor surprised.”

“Nay, aunt,” answered the girl in a deprecating tone, “I meant nothing like that indeed. But having heard you say yourself that Uncle Ralph was likely some day to——”

“Never, Mildred!” interrupted Mrs. Clyffard—“never, never! You are mistaken. You never heard me say so! and if you dreamed you heard me, see you forget that dream. Ralph Clyffard is sane enough, but he will not live long.”—Mildred pushed aside her plate, its contents almost untouched, and sank back in her chair with her hand pressed to her brow.—“Nay, I wish I could think otherwise, child,” continued her aunt coldly. “There is no life—not yours or Gideon’s—which I can afford so ill to lose just now as his. But he has not many years, perhaps months, to pass at his beloved Clyffe. When I am widowed here—well-dowered though I be, and free to live my life out at the Hall—things will be

altered ; I shall no longer be mistress. Rupert will be bringing home some smooth-faced, smooth-tongued wife, who swears she loves the books that are his idols. Or Raymond will have free quarters at the Hall for some still more hateful mate—a gipsy from the forest, like as not, some large-limbed fury, whom I shall have to poison.” Her hands closed tightly as she spoke, so that the pink nails of her fingers stabbed her delicate flesh, and she threw open the casement, as if for air. But for that, she must needs have seen Mildred’s tell-tale bosom palpitate, and the colour rush impetuously over cheek and brow. But the lady of Clyffe had passions of her own to hide, and kept her face averted, though she spoke on. “Where I have ruled, I will rule still to the end ; and it is you who must help me to do so, as the mouse helped the lion in the fable.” She paused, as if waiting for a reply, but no answer coming, save in the quick throbbings of the girl’s heart, inaudible to her aunt, although to her own terrified ears they seemed to fill the room with sound, Mrs. Clyffard added, “Do you know *how* you must help me, Mildred ? ”

“No, aunt.”

“By being a dutiful and faithful daughter-in-law. You must marry Rupert Clyffard, and that soon.”

“But I do not love him, aunt.”

“So much the better, niece. Your judgment, when you come to rule him, will be the less likely to be blinded.”

“But he does not love *me*,” faltered the girl.

“Even if such were the case,” answered Mrs. Clyffard coldly, “there are means to make him, without using love-potions. But he does love you, and you know it, Mildred ; for *I* know it, and you must needs have learned it before me. When he took your hand in the Oak Gallery but yesterday, and strove to kiss it—pshaw, never blush for that ; it was only I who witnessed it—you were right not to suffer him. You did very well ; but do not say that Rupert is indifferent to you. That was not the first love-passage between you two, as I presume. Ay, so I thought. Why, what a trembling

dove is this, that the very mention of her future mate should flutter her thus !”

Mildred Leigh did tremble, yet not with the timidity of love, but rather as the dove cowers and quails over whom the hawk is poisoning, and threatening to stoop.

“‘By my faith,’ as the Clyffards say, although I doubt whether one of them ever had enough to swear by, but you play the maiden prettily. Only, look you, Mildred,” added her aunt, changing her tone of raillery to one of sharpest earnest, “do not overact it; or rather, keep your more frigid moods for me, but to your lover thaw a little. You may let him kiss your hand next time—not snatch your fingers away, as though his lips were springes. I thought to have had a very different rôle to support, girl, when I brought you to Clyffe Hall last year; I deemed you would want a duenna or Mistress Prudence to say, ‘Hang back, hang back.’ Why, there is not a handsomer lad than Rupert Clyffard betwixt this and Carel, and fitted with all the graces that are dear to fools of your age; while, as for those matters to which a woman, if a wise one, sets her mind, there is scarcely a better match in all the north. ‘What luck was mine,’ say all folks here, yet yours is twice as good. Ralph Clyffard was neither young nor fair to look upon; and he had sons—another woman’s sons—and Cyril was alive; while you, you moping, milk-faced fool, beware how you anger me with tears! I have not got thus far upon my way to be balked by a girl’s mad fancy. Mad? There never was a Clyffard half so mad as you would be if you said ‘No’ to Rupert; for if you lose him, Mildred—who are poor as any beggar, dependent on my bounty for your very garments—you lose all you see from yonder casement—wealth; and station, that makes the proudest smile upon you; and power, that bends the stiff neck of the poor; and you gain—Mildred, be sure of this—a life-long enemy in one who never yet has failed to work her will!”

“I know it well,” answered Mildred, hopelessly. “I will endeavour not to shrink; I will strive to love your step-son Rupert.”

“I care not for that, girl; strive you to marry him. Now, get you gone, for I have webs to weave that demand my most deliberate thought. This Carr here, he is your uncle, child, but not your equal. Give him your finger tips, but not to kiss. Be cold and stately to him, and especially in the presence of Ralph Clyffard. Do not fear lest this should anger him; it will be easy enough to be affable when you have become great: for a smooth word from one who is in honour heals all.”

CHAPTER V

THE HEIR AND THE HEIR-PRESUMPTIVE.

THERE is nothing more strange than that the aspect of external nature, as beautiful many thousand years ago as on this enchanted morning (which, so fresh and fair it is, might well be the first that ever broke on human vision), was cared for nothing at all till within the last three hundred years; that the common glories of sea and land, offered alike to lord and vassal, should have been by both rejected and ignored. To our far back ancestors, a yellow primrose was a yellow primrose, and nothing more; and if any other flower ever awoke in them reflections too deep for tears, they have carefully concealed the circumstance. Doubtless there must have been persons born with some spiritual discernment of natural beauties; the scarred sea-rocks were not merely horrid to all; a forest must have been suggestive to some of other things besides the chase; a mountain stream of more than a creel of fish. Nay, some mute inglorious Wordsworth, it is probable, existed in all those generations, which have left us scarcely one wood-note wild concerning the scenes which lay about them, as now about ourselves. Did they then love no birds but such as were good for table? Were their parks only fair because their venison grew therein? Some we know thanked God for the early sunrise, that enabled them to start betimes upon a successful foray—thanked Him,

that is, for luck in larceny (by no means 'petty')—but did men ever thank Him for the sunrise itself, "the awful rose of dawn?" Was it the premature birth of what is called "the love of the picturesque," which caused them to lay out hideous gardens, trim and true as measuring-line could make them, and surround the same with box-trees, elaborately cut in travesty of the human form? Were all the priests who mumbled Latin and counted beads—thus worshipping, as one might say, through the medium of the classics and mathematics—spiritually deaf and blind, that they knew nothing of the truths which nature speaks direct from God himself? Or if they did know, how was it that they never told their people? Perhaps they had their reasons for silence upon this matter; perhaps there was an unauthorised sect, calling themselves Lovers of Nature,* whom it was expedient to put down, and a censorship of the press, which excised everything written about her, as William Cobbett would have eliminated from poetry all adjectives. But even the monks (who have been made answerable for so much, poor men, although they were useful too in their time) cannot be held responsible for this fact, that when our forefathers—a good many times removed—set their hands to build, their notion of what we call "aspect" was peculiar; and if, in spite of them, their ground-floor sitting-rooms did happen to command a view, they generally saw their error, and hastened to repair it, by raising a great wall immediately in front.

All allowance made for their pardonable solicitude to make our dwelling-houses defensible, when every man's hand (with a cross-bow in it) was against his brother, our architects of old, whether British, Danish, or Norman, were, it must be admitted, *Goths*. If they did build a house upon a hill, it was not for the prospect, but in order the better to annoy people who might want to approach it; and when you find a peep-hole in a Norman tower, designed, as you might think, to afford a bird's-eye

* Not by any means to be compared with those persons now termed "Naturalists," who, it has been said, would peep and botanise upon their mother's grave.

view of Paradise, you may be disabused of that idea by remarking a little furrow down the centre of the outlet, for the convenience of pouring melted pitch upon visitors. Clyffe Hall was no exception to other old houses in preparations for this sort of welcome, as likewise in its independence of all outward attractions. The ground-floor was shrouded in gloom. Either the windows were recesses, broad within, but narrowing in the thickness of the wall to the merest slits, or they were hidden by the terrace parapet. Moreover, where the panes were moderately large, many of them were of stained glass, and blushed with the blood of knights and dames of the House of Clyffard. The library, in particular, which should have been the best-lighted room of all, was the worst. It was beneath the level of the terrace, and entered from within by a descent; the sun even at noon-day only made a sort of splendid gloom there. Its beams had to struggle through the painted shields of Sir John and Sir Gwinnet, of Sir Bevis and Sir Mark, before they passed the window. This apartment had once been the armoury, and still bore traces of the use to which it had been put, before the mighty tomes, standing shoulder to shoulder, as though resolved not to be taken down alone and read, garrisoned the room. Above the shelves glanced many a fair device, deserving to be better seen, of mace and spear, of axe and harquebuse; and upon the oaken panels between the shelves shone whole sheaves of ancient weapons, the gleanings of many a harvest-field of war.

Upon the morning of the interview between Mildred Leigh and her aunt, this apartment was occupied, as it usually was at that period of the day, by Rupert and Raymond Clyffard. They were sitting within the same oriel-window, and close to the casement, in order to get as much light as possible for the occupations in which they were engaged. The elder was poring over an old ill-printed volume of romances, the younger was engaged in making a fish-hook attractive for trout.

"I wish you wouldn't whistle so, Ray," observed the former testily; "how is one to read?"

"I didn't know you *were* reading, Rue ; you seemed to me to be only thinking."

"*Only* thinking," sighed Rupert ; "but that is much harder work than reading."

"Is it ?" replied the other carelessly. "I never do either, and therefore am no judge. What are the important matters which demand your attention so urgently this morning, that my whistling *Charlie is my Darling* would interrupt them ? I was doing it solely out of compliment to your Jacobite tendencies."

The other did not reply, but sat with downcast eyes fixed on the floor, on which the rich heraldic blazons were thrown, tracing idly with his foot the fantastic course of bend and ribbon, lozenge and fret. After a little he broke silence with, "I wish I was you, Raymond !"

"That is an odd wish," returned the other, laughing. "Do you who know so much, then, desire to be ignorant ? Or, being the heir of Clyffe, would you exchange it for a younger brother's portion ?"

"There are worse things than being poor," returned the young man gravely ; "but it was not of mere station I was thinking. I envy you your happy disposition, your never-flagging spirits, and those pleasures which the simplest sports never fail to afford. I envy you your very strength of limb, Raymond, and the manly beauty of your face."

"Really, Rue, you make me blush," replied the other laughing. "I am not accustomed to such pretty speeches from the ladies, I assure you. Mrs. Clyffard was so good as to tell me in confidence, only yesterday, that I was a black devil. I wonder whether there is such a thing as a white she-fiend."

"Hush, Ray, hush ; the walls of Clyffe have ears."

"Their talent for hearing, Rue, is, however, a very modern accomplishment ; just two years old, as I reckon, this day. You may shake your head, brother, but until our good father brought that woman hither, what things we spoke reached only the ears for which they were intended."

"She is our father's wife, Ray, and—and"—Rupert stopped and stammered.

"And we should respect her for his sake," you were about to add," observed Raymond coolly. "Upon the contrary, I protest it is mainly upon his account that I hold her so vile. He is a changed man since he married her; he loves not us, his boys, as he used to do; and as for poor me, it is well if he does not end by hating me. Do you remember telling me that ancient story of the Greek creature, half woman, half serpent, fair without, but foul within, with whom men fell enamoured, and so perished? There must be some glamour about this woman, or our father could never be so enmeshed."

"I have read, Raymond, that men when old are more liable to the enchantments of love than even in youth."

"I can scarcely believe that, Rupert," exclaimed the younger gravely, after a little pause.

"And scarcely can I, brother, yet a wise man has written it, who had himself been young. It is certain that Mrs. Clyffard is gentle and comely; and there lies magic enough in that without sorcery."

"Comely!" echoed Raymond with abhorrence. "I could as easily admire the comeliness of a viper. Gentle! ay, the stealthy gentleness of a tigress, as she creeps upon her unconscious victim. You smile incredulously, Rue; you have only seen her velvet foot; but I have seen its claws."

"She has, I do think, been cruel to you, Raymond."

"Nay, brother, say rather she has been herself to me; to my father, and to you she has never revealed her true character. How strange it is, Rue, with all your brains and book-learning, that you cannot read a wicked woman! You see how our father's melancholy deepens daily—how his mind withdraws itself more and more from all wholesome matters, to brood over the sad fortunes of our house; and yet you cannot see who casts the shadow, and ever thrusts herself between him and the fostering sun."

"It needs no woman to make a Clyffard sad," returned Rupert gloomily; "to blacken the annals of our race

would indeed be a superfluous task. There is scarcely a chamber in this house which is not eloquent of our crimes or shame; and if we go out of doors, there is no tongue but wags to the same tune."

"They wag not so to me, brother; never, at least, since I pitched Gawain Harrison into Nettle Hole for prating to me about Guy Clyffard. It is understood now, when I go a-fishing, that I want a man to carry my basket, not to tell foolish stories against my ancestors. Why, half a century hence, that righteous chastisement of Gawain at my hands will have swollen into an attempt to murder a vassal. Does Heaven set its face against us, think you, more than against other folk, or is it not rather that we have rejected its alliance? You might just as well complain that we do not sit here in the pure sunlight, when we have shut it out ourselves with yon painted pride. I swear that I would rather be that peasant-boy, keeping sheep upon Ribble Fell side, than be cursed with ancestors whose memory so dispirited me. If Guy Clyffard did leap into Boden Pot, what then? Are you and I, and all his descendants, obliged to jump after him? Come, sweep these cobwebs from your mind, Rue, or one day they will do you a mischief."

"What mean you by that Sir?" cried Rupert, starting to his feet, his blue eyes gleaming with rage. "How dare you say such things? You call others cruel, but none have ventured to wound me thus far."

"My dear Rue," returned the other with astonishment, and a pity that he strove in vain to conceal, "what have I said to anger you? I declare, upon my honour, that I meant nothing more than that such morbid thoughts were bad for anybody. Have we not even now the saddest proof of it in our poor——"

"Be silent; do not mention him," interrupted Rupert menacingly. "I tell you, I will not hear his name."

"What! not my father's?" returned Raymond. "I was merely about to repeat that his melancholy arises mainly from encouraging such fancies."

"Perhaps," answered Rupert, with an effort at self-

control—"perhaps it does. I misunderstood you, Raymond ; I did not mean——"

"I am sure you meant me no harm," replied the other, laying his hand kindly on Rupert's shoulder. "Come now with me a-fishing in Ribble Beck."

"I will join you there, Ray, presently ; but I have something else to do first, I have indeed. I would rather be alone for a little." Rupert said this, walking hastily towards the door, as though afraid lest his brother's importunity should overcome his own resolution.

Raymond's eyes followed him with genuine sympathy until the door had closed behind him.

"Poor Rue ! poor Rue !" he murmured. "God grant that thou may'st not bring the curse down on thine own head ! It is no wonder that such prophecies work out their own fulfilment, when they have minds like thine to deal with. I wish with thee that thou and I could but change places. Rubbish of that sort might be shot *here*, I fancy," striking his broad chest a sounding blow, "without much damage. I am none of your dreamy ones, thank God ! It is eleven o'clock. There are one, two, three good hours of fishing before me ; and then, ah ! then, for my sweet Mildred !"

The dark face lightened as he spoke, and the eyes, somewhat too stern for boyhood, softened like the black waters of a mountain tarn touched by the moon, as he strode gaily from the sunken chamber, and through the vaulted passages to the hall, whistling his merry tune. So blithe he shone amid the general gloom, it seemed as though the haunting shadows of the place fled at his sprightly step, and gathered together after him more darkly than before, like clouds behind the sun.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MASTER OF CLYFFE.

RALPH CLYFFARD was no bookworm like his elder son, and yet no sportsman like his younger. Now, for a man of fortune to live in the country and be happy, it is almost essential that he should be one of these two things. Even nowadays, when he has the fortnightly, or even weekly, dispensation of justice at the next town to attend, and the Board of Guardians offers its uneasy chair at the like intervals, time hangs heavy with that country gentleman whose library mainly consists of works of the era of the *Turkish Spy*, and who cannot take sweet counsel with his keeper concerning "the birds." Still the *Times* comes every morning, save on that unhappy Monday, and there are mitigations in short swallow-flights to town by help of the steam-horse, whose hot white breath can be seen, let us hope, from our Castle of Indolence, rising serpentine along the distant valley, like incense from the Altar of Travel. But it is only lately that such has been the case. If a grandfather of ours, being a country squire, did not hunt, it awoke commiseration or contempt, according as he was popular or the reverse among his neighbours. If he took to reading, it was a portent, a course of proceeding so altogether abnormal and uncanny, that it was not much spoken about; but if he was neither sportsman nor scholar, people set him down as mad. Ralph Clyffard was not mad, but he was possessed with a devil—the fiend of family pride;

not a reasonable sort of disease with any folks, but in his case unaccountable in the highest degree; for there never had been a Clyffard, from Bryan the founder—a freebooter—to Cyril, the shell of whose rayless mind had not been yet put underground, of whom their descendants had any cause to *be* proud; on the contrary, that generation was an exceptional one, the record of which was unstained by gross vices. What a gracious power is that of time, which can make dulness shine from afar with starlight mellowness, aye, and hallow crime itself! How strange it is that the tyrant of a few ages ago should look to us the hero, and the wild rake win our readiest charity, if not extort our admiration, while the bully and the sot of to-day are held at their just value. If the future is seen darkly, or rather dimly, it is not least distorted like this past; there is no weird charm about it, that can make evil seem good, and baseness beauty. I have known even godly men to be greatly befooled in this matter, taking their Jack o' Lanterns, arising from the phosphorescent bodies of their dead ancestors, for quite a celestial lustre; the few centuries over which their forefathers have straddled more or less ignobly, dividing their thoughts with that eternity which they hope to pass with the saints of the earth.*

This is surely something worse than unreasonable. A good and wise father is an inestimable blessing, and if *his* father has been good and wise before him, and *his* father before *him*, it is a subject of satisfaction indeed to a great-grandson, and the more so, inasmuch as such continuity of excellence is rather rare; but the mere fact of being able to trace the *existence* of one's forefathers—unless by their good deeds—even to infinite series, is surely no genuine ground for self-congratulation; the sole credit is due to the Herald's college, or to the man whom you have ventured to censure, perhaps, for having somewhat prolonged his task in the muniment-room (at a guinea a day, and

* "Their inward thought is that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling-places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names."

free quarters in your ancestral mansion) of making out the family-tree. That red-nosed scribe himself is indubitably descended from the same ancestor—one Adam—as you are ; and the sole difference between you two in this respect is, that *you* have the money and the inclination to spend it upon making clear those last few steps which intervene between yourself and William the Norman at furthest. The rest of the ladder is hidden, like Jacob's, in impenetrable cloud. Nor am I to be told that this is all vulgar talk ; that a certain divinity doth hedge about this wonder of long descent made plain, more than can be explained away by mortal scribbler ; for if, at any round of the said ladder, some ancestor of any man of lineage has chanced to leave his purse behind him, we call his descendant yeoman, or worse, look you, and attach no sort of divinity to him at all. Thus there are farms in Devon, as doubtless all over this historic land of ours, which have been held by the same race in an unbroken line for twenty generations ; whose blood is as pure as the Howards' These are much "respected" as long as they pay their rent ; but it is reserved for their landlord—the lord of the manor, who dates perhaps at earliest from some rogue whom Bluff Harry loved (for his wife's sake), and to whom he gave lands filched from their common mother, the Church—to boast himself in scutcheons and chevrons, in "jackasses fighting for gilt gingerbread," as a gentleman of ancient lineage. One must own some timber beside one's family-tree to get *that* held in this sort of Druidical reverence.

The Clyffards had plenty of timber, and all things fitting beside ; that jewel of fancy price, their ancestry, was splendidly set, and had a gorgeous casket. It had never, in the most perilous times, been stripped of its surrounding lustre. The sort of chivalry that had animated Norman Bryan had been transmitted through all his line ; "the good old rule, the simple plan, that they should take who have the power, and they should keep who can," had been preserved in its integrity. The Clyffards had had no need to marry heiresses ; their shields bore no

escutcheons of pretence ; their prosperity had grown like a river, but, unlike it, had needed no foreign feeders to sustain it. There had been dry seasons, when it had fallen a little, and there had been times of civil commotion, when it had even been dammed up ; but the obstacle removed, the broad stream of prosperity had only poured forth in the greater volume. They had cared nothing for roses, red or white ; but each had smelled the sweeter in the nostrils of wise St. Mark, as it had prevailed over the other. They had loved King Charles and monarchy, but not with such a perfect love that it had cast out the fear of Cromwell and his Ironsides. Sir John, indeed, had made a wrong cast in that matter, and defended Clyffe against Lambert. The blood of Cavalier and of Roundhead had not refused to mix in the castle-moat, for four long weeks of seige. The west wing had sorely suffered. You might see even now the scars upon the stubborn stone. Many a shock of battle had that front withstood, and often hearkened to the roar of culverin and ring of steel, which now regarded the trim garden only, and the sleeping waters, and listened to the mowing of the scythe and the leap of fish. It had done with war for ever ; and swallow-haunted, ivy-clad, it looked like one who, having had his days of trouble, henceforth spends a life of leisure among friends. Even the trouble had been short-lived. Without storming and without surrender, the banner of the parliament had been quietly substituted for that of the king upon the round tower of Clyffe Hall, and General Lambert had dined with Sir John at the same table, in the banqueting-room, under which the royal legs of the Stuart had condescended to place themselves only a few months before.

It was of such ancestors as these that Ralph Clyffard was proud ; and of far worse than these. He was by no means a bad man himself ; there was not one of his long line, perhaps, who, being compared with him, would not upon the whole, have suffered by the contrast. There was really a sort of sublimity in his ignorance of the true state of the case—in his

personal humility and in his outrageous family pride. "I am nothing in myself," he might have exclaimed, "but everything in virtue of my descent from an unbroken line of almost unmitigated scoundrels." He hoped, when his time came, as it must come to all (and death wore its chief awe in his eyes, inasmuch as it had not spared those great ones whose proud faces frowned even upon *him*, from their canvas in the oak gallery)—he hoped, I say, to meet his end at last like a Clyffard and a Christian, without being at all aware that that devout desire involved a contradiction in terms. And yet he was not without an impression that his forefather Guy had not behaved altogether as became a person of his condition. Many took it for granted, and with reason, that Ralph Clyffard suffered no steel to shear his locks, and drank nothing stronger than water from the spring, in hopes to save that wicked ancestor at least some years of purging fires; for the old faith which had served the Clyffards for so long was his, robbed of none of its pretensions save in one vital particular. Never since excommunicated Guy's time had priests been harboured in Clyffe Hall. They had had the run of the place at one period, which had indeed, at certain troublous epochs, been, as it were, burrowed out for their convenience. There was a priest's chamber between the ceiling and the roof of at least one sleeping-room of state. The Clyffards had been not unwilling to run certain risks for the Church's sake, provided that the penalty was not extreme; they made such a bid for heaven as they considered reasonable, but not to the peril of house and lands. They affected religion much as a sort of Anti-purgatory Insurance Society; but they were not prepared to pay any exorbitant premium. Some of them even thought it possible that there might not be a purgatory after all. The relation between the House of Clyffard and the Church of Rome being of this ticklish description, it surely behoved the latter power to be as winsome and indulgent in all cases of peccadillo as might be consistent with the security of the latter's souls; yet in the above-mentioned case of Guy's favourite blood-

hound, which had suffered capital punishment by the king's order ("martyred," said its master) for child-eating, great complications arose. The priest most unexpectedly took the mawkish view of the matter. "Another word, and I bury my dog in the chapel!" quoth irascible Guy.

"At your peril!" exclaimed he of the shaven crown, with a worse shudder than he had experienced upon the occasion of the original offence. "Beware the thunders of the Church."

"Anathema Maranatha to your heart's content—big words break no bones," replied the stout Squire contemptuously; and he buried the dog where he had threatened, with all the funeral honours that laymen could pay. The priest left Clyffe, shaking the dust from his shoes; and at the very earliest date at which the fulminating material could be manufactured, Guy Clyffard was excommunicated.

They cursed him in eating, they cursed him in drinking;
They cursed him in coughing, in sneezing, in winking.
Never was heard such a terrible curse.
But what gave rise
To no little surprise,
Nobody seemed one penny the worse.

Not a jackdaw in the western tower moulted a feather.

When the immediate irritation had subsided, both parties repented having resorted to such extreme measures. Guy Clyffard did penance—having permission to boil his pease very soft indeed—and the Church of Rome took him once more under her protection. But there was henceforth this difference, that her ministers never came to Clyffe Hall unless they were sent for, and sometimes, it was whispered, not even then. Poor Guy perished without any to shrive him; no priest was among those witnesses whom his widow had summoned upon her side to prove that he had died, if not in the odour of sanctity, at least in his bed, and not in Boden Pot. In expectation, doubtless, that he would be paid some scurvy trick of the kind, the deceased had left be-

hind him the most stringent directions to the Clyffards who should come after him, that, in case he should fail to receive his last sacramental rites, no lodgment should henceforward be given in Clyffe Hall to tricky priests. The document which conveyed this posthumous mandate was a wonder in its way, being full of those identical "big words"—mere threatenings and thunders—which he had himself set at naught in the mouth of one much more privileged—if custom is privilege—to utter them; yet, strange to say, they were obeyed. One or two of his descendants may have been swayed by the convenience of the command. It was more agreeable for many reasons that the keeper of the Clyffard conscience, instead of being on the spot to watch its workings too minutely, should step over from the hamlet hard by, and perform the duties of his office when required; but Ralph Clyffard obeyed the injunction for its own sake. The ill-written, ill-spelled parchment, dictated by malice, and enjoining but a mean sort of revenge, was in his eyes a sacred writing. He kept it in a vast iron-bound chest, furnished with double locks, and containing a number of other family documents, from the original deed of gift conferring the manor of Clyffe *in capite* of our lord the king, by the sergeanty of finding him a sheaf of arrows and six loaves of oat-bread whenever he should hunt in Ribble Forest—down to poor Cyril's mad will, not worth the parchment it was written on.

Looking upon Ralph Clyffard's haggard but not ill-favoured face, and the plaited hair that fringed it, one could not but wonder what he could have been in his youth. Could he ever have been a trustful child, saying his prayers at a mother's knee? A light-hearted boy, enjoying the sports of the hour with all a boy's capacity for enjoyment? A young man courting the smiles of beauty, his pulses throbbing with the fulness of the spring, had he ever experienced those palmy days which, long or short, fall to the lot of almost all mortals? Most of us have met such men, and tried to picture them in the cradle, in the play-ground, or at the altar with their brides—and failed. Their past is not to be imagined;

and even those who witnessed it can tell us little. Of Ralph Clyffard, men knew only that he had been a dutiful son under circumstances when it was not easy to be dutiful ; that a kind heart lay somewhere within him, notwithstanding his haughty and austere behaviour ; and that in his first marriage he had pleased his father, and in his second, pleased himself. He had been brought up at Clyffe from his infancy, but not, of course, as its heir. He had never desired to be so ; and had driven the very thought of it away from him as far as possible. Not only did his childless Uncle Roderick look likely to live for a score of years to come, but his own father Arthur, the younger brother, was alive, a stout man too ; and what was still more to the purpose, there was Cyril, a hale boy, but a twelvemonth older than himself. Yet even then Ralph was fully persuaded that he should be master of Clyffe, for that the curse of the Clyffards must needs fall.

CHAPTER VII.

HUSBAND AND WIFE

"HAS Cyril's death made you so very sad, Ralph, that not even *I* can comfort you!" asked Mrs. Clyffard of her husband, as he sat in a small chamber communicating with his dressing-room, and in which he was accustomed to transact his business affairs. He smiled, not sadly, but gratefully, lovingly, in her false face, yet gravely shook his head.

"You always comfort me, dear one. If I were dejected on my own account only, you would soon cheer me. But it is not so, Grace, although many would be sad who knew their doom had been spoken, who felt as I feel"—he laid his hand upon his heart—"that I have had my warning, and must soon go; yet I do not repine for that matter."

"I will not combat your opinion, love," answered she, "fallacious and ill-grounded though I believe it to be: with me, whatever you think is sacred."

"Sweet Grace, how I love you!" returned the old man. "It is only for your sake that I regret to go. I have reigned here my allotted time; how gladly would I leave all to my successor, Heaven knows, if I might only think he would hold it. Poor Rue! poor Rue!"

Ralph Clyffard bent his head, and hid his face. His wife's arm still encircled his neck; her voice was low and soft, and seemed to tremble with love and pity;

but her eyes looked down upon him with contemptuous scorn.

"And what is to prevent Rupert from holding his own, husband? Nothing, save a dark legend of your house—a morbid fantasy of your own—a——"

"Did you never read my Uncle Roderick's will, Grace?" interrupted Ralph.

"His *will*?" cried Mrs. Clyffard, involuntarily withdrawing her caressing hand. "I never even heard that he had made a will. I did not know that he *could* have made a will. Is not the land entailed? Father to son, uncle to nephew; has it not ever been so with your ancient race!"

"It has ever been so," returned her husband gloomily. "Father to son, but never to son's son, since Guy's time."

"Aye, aye, exclaimed Mrs. Clyffard impatiently: but masking her apprehensions with a great effort, she added, in a soothing tone: "Let us not talk of that, Ralph; let us not think of it, if possible." Then, with affected carelessness, she added, "Is yonder dusty parchment at your elbow this said will?"

She reached her hand towards it, but he was beforehand with her, and gently, but firmly, he retained his hold upon it. "Nay, do not open it, Grace, for mere curiosity's sake."

If he could but have seen her face in its rapacious earnestness—the intense longing of her greedy eyes; if he could but have known what it cost her to restrain the nervous twitching of those taper fingers, he could scarcely have talked of curiosity—it was cupidity aghast with fear.

"I will tell you all that Roderick would have me tell, wife, if he were alive. I hide nothing from you—nothing."

"Nothing, Ralph," returned she tenderly, her mind straining after the precious parchment like a greyhound in the leash. "If I thought you kept a secret from me, it would kill me."

"Would it so, dear one? Then, since I would have

you live, you shall hear my Uncle Roderick's will. He herein leaves Clyffe to Arthur his son, and to Cyril after him, for thirty years, and then——”

“But he could not leave it, Ralph. How mean you then he left it?”

“He thought he could. He was mad—the second son, and yet mad; think of that, Grace! No lawyer has ever seen this writing; it would count as nothing in his eyes; he would smile at the dead Clyffard's ravings, and I do not choose that any man should do that. For thirty years willed he Clyffe to my father and my brother, after which he shall return—so it runs—and resume his own again. I have seen his coffin in the chapel vault closed with a mighty lock like yonder chest—save that it opens from within as well—and a key is buried with him, that he may arise, and let himself out when the time comes. The thirty years will very soon be ended.”

“I trust, Ralph, that you do not believe——”

“Fear not, Grace,” interrupted her husband quietly; “I keep my own wits still, although they are sorely tried. I almost wish it was not so, and that I could deem dead Roderick might come to life again. It is worse to think that he was mad, having no right to be so; and rather than men should know of this sad will, I would lose many a fair acre of those which it so strangely devises. It was the mere reading of it which set me sorrowing. How goes it with Rupert, think you, Grace?”

“He looks bravely, husband. He will fitly wear your honours after you, though not, I trust, for long, long years to come.”

“He has heard the news, I suppose?”

“I told him myself, Ralph, lest some vulgar tongue should wound him with the rough delivery of it; and I charged the household not to speak of it within his hearing.”

“You should have charged them not to speak of it at all,” returned her husband sternly. “Great Heaven, are the misfortunes of our house to be the talk of grooms!”

“We cannot chain the tongue, Ralph; and since the law forbids to cut it out, as your high-handed race were

wont to do when a menial's speech displeased them, the most we can do is to direct its course."

"As wise as fair!" repeated Ralph in a low tone. "You have done right, Grace, as you always do."

"Nay, husband, I have only done my best. Little, indeed, is the best I can do, in return for what I have received at your hands. I was low, and you lifted me up; I was base, and you set me in honour." A shadow flitted over her husband's brow. "Not," she continued, "that I ever think of these things now, save when I am alone with you, as now. I have left the past behind me altogether. Connected with your race, although by marriage only, I feel myself well-born."

"That is rightly said, Grace. The Clyffards, like the king, confer nobility itself. Never speak, then, of what was once your lowly lot, even to me. You are mistress of Clyffe; you will be so after I am gone—that is until ——" Ralph Clyffard paused and sighed, the wave of thought overtaken by another ere it could break in speech. "And what did Rupert say when you told him of poor Cyril?"

"He said he was grieved to hear it, but scarcely surprised. He hoped Uncle Cyril would be buried at the Hall, and not at the Dene." Ralph shuddered. "Then he seemed lost in thought, and answered me at random; but presently, upon some trifling interruption—it was the organ in the gallery, played by Mildred Leigh, I think—he brightened up at once. Music is good for him, and the companionship of the young. It is but a dull life he leads here, and fit to make a young man sad."

"Raymond is not sad," returned her husband, like one who, to gain time, urges something which he knows has but little force.

"That is true," answered Mrs. Clyffard coldly. "To chase the stag, the fox, the otter, is happiness enough for Raymond. He might have been a huntsman born, for any instinct of gentle birth that he possesses. Nay, even a huntsman would have some reverence for the race which he served, whereas Raymond——"

"Well wife, what of Raymond?"

"Nothing, Ralph—nothing. You are grave enough already, without my saddening you further. And, after all, perhaps he only does it to vex *me*. He does not love his step-mother; that is only natural. A man's sons unless they are dutiful, like Rupert, too often resent their father's second marriage."

"Resent it!" cried Ralph Clyffard, starting up and smiting the table with his fist—"resent it! What! is he his father's tutor? Am I to be told my duty by this rude boy? Have I robbed him of gold or lands, that he should be envious of me? Does he grudge an old man that which renders the last few years of his life less lonely, less drear? Even had we children, he would have his mother's portion; they would not rob him of a silver piece. Nay, I have left him thrice as much besides. Unnatural, undutiful, base!"

"Hush, Ralph—hush. Be calm. Do nothing in anger. Let poor me, at least, be not the means of sowing dissension between father and son; for he is your son, you know, after all. What I was about to say was only this, that knowing how dear to me is the honour of your house, and with what worship I look upon the Clyffards, alien though I be, he scoffs and sneers at what should be held most reverend, at least, by one of their own blood; nay, he says, 'blood' is nothing. 'Why not bone—a gentleman of bone? If old blood is so precious, why, then, are old bones so cheap?' But I fear I vex you, husband."

Ralph Clyffard's eyes were flashing fire. One hand clung to the table, grasping it like a vice; the other was pressed against his heart. His white lips moved as with a spasm twice and thrice before they could shape "Go on."

"There is little more to say, Ralph; I have said already more than I intended. You must please hold this a secret; you must understand it is to me alone he thus speaks out. He flings his gibes about at all, 'tis true, making a mock of ancestry; but he keeps his worst for me, because, as I have said, he knows

the barb goes home. His aim at me is surest when he strikes through you and yours. For instance——”

“Ay, for instance,” gasped Ralph Clyffard; “give me that.”

“He says ‘the fair woman,’ for whose sake Bertram killed his brother, and whom you yourself——”

Ralph uttered a cry of horror. “I see her now!” cried he. “Some death is coming, or the curse is falling! Look—look; *there—there!*”

“Dear husband, you are pointing to the mirror; you behold only the reflection of myself.” She spoke as lightly as she could, but her voice trembled with genuine terror. “Dear Ralph, ’tis I. Do you not know your Grace?”

He shrank from her caress with almost loathing. “Touch me not!” cried he, repelling her with one hand, while he shaded his eyes with the other. “I cannot bear it; so like—so like! Was it indeed the mirror?”

“Look for yourself,” said she, “and at the original.” She smiled her sunniest smile, and, with her head aslant, shook her fair locks about her in a shower of gold. As different looked she from that rigid form which, with menacing finger, had just glassed itself before Ralph Clyffard’s gaze, as Hebe from Atropos.”

“Fair Grace!” cried he enraptured, “how beautiful you are! it makes me young to look at you! How could I ever mistake you for another, far less for that dread spectre—harbinger of ill! Thrice have I seen it. Was it not thrice, Grace? I can think now of nothing but of thee.”

“You told me thrice, Ralph, and that it boded death, or worse; and on the fifth day these messengers arrive telling of Cyril’s end. This must be more than chance.”

“Ay, more than chance indeed.”

“Yet Raymond says there is no ‘fair woman’ at Clyffe save me—a cruel saying, when we think of what she was.”

"Does he dare to say that much?" explained Ralph hoarsely. "Does he think I am befooled, then?"

"Nay, he knows nothing of what you have seen. How should he, husband, save through me alone?"

"True—true; he makes light of the legends of our house."

"Makes more than light, Sir; makes merry with them, as with a churchyard tale told by a sexton to keep boys from leap-frog on the tombs; has no more reverent word for any of them than hobgoblin, bogle; and no more courteous term than dupe and fool for those who have cause to know better." She waited, looking for a storm of wrath, but this time it did not come. Ralph's mind had been working in a direction which, with all her skill, she could not follow. Like some out-mancœuvred general, who suddenly finds his beleagured foe at large, having emerged behind him underground by sap, so she stared, foiled, in her husband's quiet face, and listened to his measured tones.

"This may be, as you say, Grace; nay, if *you* say so, it is—and yet I must not be hasty. He was my late wife's favourite son."

"Parents should have no favourites, Ralph. If *she* spoiled him, that is no reason why you should complete his ruin."

"You say well, Grace; parents should have no favourites; there is no selfishness which works such ill as undue partiality in father or mother towards any of their offspring."

"Where it *is* undue," slid in the woman.

"And if, in spite of duty, such a feeling creeps into a father's heart, not only should he not exhibit it, but should strive by all means to make up to the less beloved child for the injury he has involuntarily done him. At times, I fear, upon the contrary, I have been harsh to Raymond, vexed with him, because I am vexed with my own heart on his account. His nature is so different from mine—from that of all our race."

"Ay, it is indeed."

"And yet, if he is rough in manner, he has a feeling heart."

"He went a-fishing this morning, though his Uncle Cyril died but two days back," remarked Mrs. Clyffard. "I saw him by the beck's side myself. A feeling heart, forsooth! Nay, even if he has, what matter? Why should that poor excuse be taken for grave dereliction of duty, for vice, for disrespect?"

"What would you have me do with Raymond, Grace?" asked her husband thoughtfully.

"I, Ralph? Nay, it is no concern of mine. If it is your good pleasure to pass over faults that are patent to the world, by all means do so; but seeing your solicitude upon poor Rupert's account, I——"

"Well, Grace?"

"I wonder at your blindness—that is all. Setting aside the ill effect that Raymond's example might have upon his brother—for he has the stronger will, although he is the younger—it is strange to me you do not mark his assumption, his arrogance. Not only does he show respect for none, but lords it as though he knew he were the heir of all."

"Ah, does he so?" cried Ralph.

"He does, as though his brother were already doomed. This very morning, in the library, he dared to twit him with his morbid feelings, his tainted mind, and angered him with hints at what might happen."

"Are you *sure*, wife?" inquired Ralph Clyffard, greatly moved. "How know you this? Beware how you advance this thing, if you have no certain knowledge."

"I am no tale-bearer," returned Mrs. Clyffard haughtily. "I know of myself that so it was. Believe me it would be best that these boys were kept apart."

"But Rupert would be more dull than ever, Grace."

"Then give him meet and gay companions; set the Hall doors wide, and bid your neighbours' sons be friends with the heir of Clyffe."

"I cannot do it, Grace; you know I cannot do it; and if I could, there is no neighbour's son that is his equal. They would be flatterers all."

"Then listen, Ralph; I speak this, once for all; the curse will fall, and it is you who will have called it down. Some companionship Rue must have, or he will mope—some one that will cheer, and yet will sympathise with him—some one with the same tastes, but with a healthier spirit; one he can love, and who will return his love, and above all, one who will render Clyffe—which is now hateful to him—familiar and beloved, as you have made its frowning walls to me, Ralph; and all beneath the eye of you his father, who thus need never lose sight of your beloved son, but will be gladdened day by day to see this blessing work."

"And in whom is such a paragon—such a flower of friendship—to be found?" asked Ralph Clyffard gloomily.

"Where you have found some comfort, or have told me so, dear husband—in a wife."

Ralph stared in silence, then—she silent too—observed, "But Rue is a mere boy, a child."

"Then let him wait—if you think there is no danger in his waiting. In the meantime, let him engage himself, let the girl reside here—here with me—and her good influence begin at once."

"But how can this be done, Grace? Who would consent to do it? Would it not arouse suspicion, too—the misfortune of our house being known to all—of the very thing we fear? What girl of fitting birth and station would thus be wooed, or rather would thus woo? You would not have my Rupert demean——"

Ralph stopped and stammered.

"You are thinking of *me*, husband. I am not thinking of myself, but of you and yours. I answer what you are going to say with your own words, 'The Clyffards, like the king, confer nobility itself.' However, let us talk no more of this at present; only think upon it, there may be no occasion for the remedies you seem to think so desperate. There is no hurry for a month or so."

"A month!" cried Ralph with agitation.

"Well, say, then, for two months. But remember

this ; once let the mischief go too far, and although your race were twice as ancient as it is, and your rent-roll ten times as long, no woman, gentle or simple, pure or frail, would consent to link her fate with that of Rupert Clyffard."

"I will think of it," groaned the Master of Clyffe. "Leave me now, Grace ; I cannot bear even your sweet company."

She stooped, touching with her lips his stern, unconscious brow, and left the chamber without a word ; but on the other side of the closed door she paused, and whispered to her own triumphant face, reflected in the dark and polished oak, "The doting fool is mine ; for I have sown the seed of much, and it will grow !"

CHAPTER VIII.

CLEMENT CARR DINES WITH THE FAMILY.

It has been well said, with respect to early rising, that the morning song and the evening song of most persons are very different; promises of being up with the lark, of seeing the sun rise, of having a bathe in the river before breakfast, being often given overnight with an enthusiasm in strange contrast with the loathing with which they are fulfilled. We draw the bill with the utmost readiness, since the hour of payment seems so far away; but in the dark dawn of acceptance and liquidation, how we curse our former facility for autograph-writing! Similar, although in inverse proportion, are the alternations of the human mind before and after food. No man, save a *fire-eater*, can fight well fasting; whereas, after a plentiful repast, if a man is afraid of anything, it were rank flattery to call him coward.

Thus Mr. Clement Carr, whose conduct on his arrival at Clyffe Hall before breakfast we have seen to have been almost pusillanimous, was, after breakfast, in a condition to bid defiance to the powers of at least the supernatural. He had consumed the half of a large game-pie, besides such kickshaws as trout and marmalade; while, in place of tea, he had imbibed the whole of a flagon of old ale, as well as that glass of brandy "to top up with," which is termed by would-be dyspeptic persons "a constable;" and he wanted to know *what*

the devil was meant by putting him in the housekeeper's room, and *why* the devil he had not been asked to breakfast with the family, and *how* the devil it all was. In vain did Mr. William Cator endeavour to persuade him that no personal slight had been intentionally put upon him ; that it was not the custom in great houses, or, at all events, at Clyffe, for the gentlefolk to take their morning meal together, and the Master of Clyffe himself broke his fast alone, and even dined alone.

"I shall dine in his dining-room, however," interrupted Mr. Clement with resolution. "I am not going to be fobbed off with accommodation of this sort *twice* ; not going to be set down at the same table again with a serving-man like you. Fire and furies ! am I not own brother to the mistress of the house, and uncle to wash-her-name, the other young woman ? *O cosh*, I dine with the family !"

"When Mr. Gideon is here, he does not do so," returned Cator quietly.

"Well, and what then ? Hoosh, Gideon ! I suppose I can do as I think proper ? Ain't I a——" Here Mr. Clement Carr had to contend with those sworn foes of all eloquence, and especially of the eloquence of indignation, called the hiccups. "Ain't I a—— Trout and marmalade always give them me ; it's most astronery ; nothing but brandy stops them. Wash was I going to say ? Ain't I a gentleman bred ? Whash the dush do you mean by my sleeping at the village inn ? Don't interrupt, Sir. *O cosh*, there's no village inn. I shall shleep in the besh room in this housh."

"That's the Blue Room, where the ghost is, Mr. Clement."

"Who kairsh for the ghost ? I shall shleep in the besh room, whether it's blue, or green, or yellow, or whatever coloursh it is."

"Well, I dare say Miss Grace herself, as was, will be here presently," observed Mr. William Cator ; "you had better tackle *her* about it ; it's no use bragging to me."

Accordingly, when the Mistress of Clyffe did pay the

housekeeper's room a visit, not, however, until the morning had so far advanced that Mr. Clement Carr had seen fit to refresh himself with a second meal, and had thereby kept up his courage, he at once "tackled" that lady upon the lack of personal respect that had been paid to him, Clement Carr, Esquire.

"I am sure I am very sorry, brother," returned she gravely; "you have had enough, however, I trust, to eat. I need not ask as to your drinking."

"What can one do *but* drinksh," inquired her relative in a tone half apologetic, half defiant; "shut up with a serving-man without any conversationsh?"

"What does he want, Cator?" inquired Mrs. Clyffard contemptuously.

"He wants to dine in the dining-room, and sleep in the Blue Chamber, Ma'am."

"Besh room in the housh," muttered Mr. Clement.

"You are very easily satisfied, brother; and so it shall be; only, before you dine, you must get sober. The young gentlemen of this family do not drink to excess, and what is more, there will be a young lady at table."

"Only Mildred Leigh, I supposh."

"*Only* Mildred Leigh, Sir! May I ask by what right you take upon yourself to speak in that manner of a gentlewoman whom you have never even seen? If this is a specimen of your best manners, you are not fit for the dining-room of Clyffe Hall."

"But is she not my own neesh, Grace?"

"A misfortune of birth, Sir, should not expose any person to rudeness. If you are determined to play the gentleman to-day, see you do not forget your part. Dine with us, Sir, and welcome; but keep you away in the meantime from the ale-flagon and the brandy-flask, for—mark me—it would be better for you to drown yourself this day in yonder moat, than to disgrace me and mine at the table of the Clyffards!"

With this unceremonious and conditional invitation to dinner, Mr. Clement Carr was fain to put up, although, when he had obtained it, he did not feel by any means

comfortable. The social distinctions after which we strain and strive, with a devotion that would win us heaven, if an attempt were directed to *that* end, are often very disappointing ; placed among the gold fish in a sphere far removed from our own, we do not feel at ease; they are only common carp like ourselves, it is true, but we are conscious of the absence of the auriferous scales from our own backs. They are not lively fish, these gold ones, but their dull, steady stare is extremely disconcerting ; and if it were not for the after-pleasure of boasting of our experiences in the crystal bowl, we should generally wish ourselves back in our native pond. The fox who observed that the grapes that hung out of the reach of his moderate exertions were sour, made a very just remark, and one which, in my opinion, by no means deserves the ridicule it has universally met with.

Mr. Clement Carr made every attempt of which he was capable to persuade the dinner-party at Clyffe that he was born with the auriferous scales, but therein signally failed, for he had not a characteristic in common with gold fish except their stupidity. He had determined to establish his character as one of the family, by kissing his niece, upon his introduction to Miss Mildred Leigh in the drawing-room ; but that young lady met him with so dignified and elaborate a courtesy, that he dared not venture upon such an act of violence. Mr. Rupert Clyffard gave him his hand, and uttered a few words of polite welcome in his character of host ; but Mr. Raymond drew himself up, and bowed, with no more evidence in that cold and stately curve of a desire to shake hands than is exhibited by the crescent moon. Dinner *à la Russe* was at that time unknown, but, for frigidity and silence, the meal might have been served upon a steppe of Tartary. At first, Mr. Clement racked his brains for a topic of conversation, but finding nothing but a dissertation upon the treatment of the insane, which it fortunately struck him would be inopportune, he confined himself to asking everybody, one after another, to take wine ; a ceremony which in each case froze him to the

marrow. From a scarcity of cutlery, or some other sufficient cause, it was the custom at the Dene to retain one's knife and fork throughout the repast, and Clement stuck to his upon the present occasion, notwithstanding the reiterated efforts of the servants to remove them, with the tenacity of an ensign defending his colours. Upon the other hand, being unaccustomed to a napkin, and imagining it to be the property of the attendant, he pressed it upon his acceptance whenever he came near him; finally, on becoming conscious of both errors, he essayed the first few notes of a whistle, which elsewhere had often stood him in good stead in moments of embarrassment; but catching his sister's basilisk glance fixed sternly upon him, the tune quavered into silence, and he broke out into a profuse perspiration.

With much greater equanimity, as she had already hinted, could Mrs. Clyffard have borne to see her brother taken out dead and dripping, by the heels, from the castle moat, than thus misbehave himself. She dreaded to leave him alone with those young gentlemen (one of them, too, her sworn foe) when his tongue should be loosened by wine; and yet she could scarcely summon him to leave with the ladies, as though he were a little boy. Nor, indeed, would he have obeyed her. He looked for the departure of the hostess and her niece, as the period when he should begin to recompense himself for the past restraint, as a gentleman attached to strong liquors, who has taken the temperance pledge for a limited time, regards the date of his enfranchisement. Nor, when the opportunity arrived, did Mr. Clement Carr throw away his chance. Bumper after bumper, bottle after bottle, did he drink, and still did his youthful host and Mr. Raymond keep him company, as in duty bound. He had now not the slightest difficulty in selecting a topic of conversation, nor in illustrating the same when found, with much inappropriate grimace and gesticulation. He had really some talent for imitating the lower animals, and by the exercise of this accomplishment, he transformed the stately dining-chamber

of Clyffe Hall into a dog-kennel, a nursery for kittens, and a sty tenanted by a sow with a young family. Later in the evening, he arose and caught an imaginary humble-bee in the red damask curtains, and pursued a fictitious mouse upon all-fours, till it found shelter under the sideboard. Never did performer, bent upon making himself agreeable, exhibit before so undemonstrative an audience. Mr. Rupert smiled, but it was with polite amazement. Mr. Raymond smiled, but it was with something like gratified revenge. Yet there was a feeling common to both, though unconfessed by either, which made them regret that their guest's vulgarity was of so very pronounced a type; and it was this same reason which caused the young men to look at one another, with their eyebrows raised, when Mr. Clement Carr expressed his opinion (somewhat tardily) that he had had enough of liquor, and that it was time to join the ladies.

"I think it is too late," observed Rupert quietly, "to join the ladies to-night; indeed, they have probably left the drawing-room."

"Stuff a nonshensh," returned Mr. Carr; "musht 'av a song. I musht get a song out of Mish Mildred; shmack her shouldersh elsh."

"What!" exclaimed the brothers, starting up with a single impulse, and regarding their guest with flashing eyes.

"My neesh," exclaimed Mr. Carr, apologetically; "my own neesh, you know. Now which of you young vag—that is, young gentlemen—are sweet upon her? You Mr. Rupert, ish it? or ish it you, Mr. Raymond? Ha, ha, I've foundsh you out. Leave me alone for seeing into a——"

"Sir," interrupted Rupert with dignity, "these remarks are most offensive, and must not be repeated. You are not in a fit state to enter a drawing-room."

"Whash a matter with me?" inquired Mr. Carr with virtuous warmth.

"You are drunk," observed Raymond impetuously.

"Do not venture to utter that lady's name again within my hearing."

"Hoity-toity!" replied the guest; "so it's you who are her sweetheart, is it? Shly dog!"

"What my brother has said," observed Rupert hastily, "is what I feel myself, and what every *gentleman* must feel." He laid a stress upon the word, such as could not escape the observation even of one less sober than the person he addressed.

"Take you care, Rupert Clyffard," answered Clement, stung for the nonce into sober rage. "I have clipped the wings of as fierce bantams as you; you may come some day into my——"

"Your what?" asked a woman's voice, low and clear as the song of a snake-charmer. "What folly is this you talk, Clement? I am afraid you have been setting these young gentlemen but a bad example. How late you sit over your wine! Mildred has retired to her room, and I should have done likewise, had I not been attracted on my way by what sounded almost like a broil."

"There was no broil, Madam," observed Raymond haughtily; "there was only Mr. Clement Carr."

"Whash a matter now?" inquired the latter gentleman, awakened by the mention of his name from a slumber (induced by his sister's harangue) of the probable duration of two seconds, but which had left his mind a blank as to all past transactions. "Whash a matter, Grace?"

"Follow me, Sir, and I will show you your room," observed Mrs. Clyffard icily. "It is the Blue Room, is it not?"

"The besh room in the house," returned Clement triumphantly, "whatever coloursh it is."

Soe led him up the grand old staircase, ample enough for a hearse and four to pass its fellow—along the picture-gallery, silent, but all eyes, and through an echoing passage, where, from out the dim obscure, four footballs seemed to come forth to meet their own.

"What a long way to come to bed!" observed

Clement, greatly sobered by their cold and lonely travel, as well as by certain apprehensions which were gradually making themselves apparent, pushing their heads up like coral-islands above the ocean of wine which he had swallowed. "And whash my room got three doors for?" Mr. Carr was in a condition when objects are apt to multiply themselves to human vision, but he had not seen treble: there really were three doors to his room, although when he had previously visited it, to make his toilet before dining with the family, he had not observed them. "Whash the baize-door for?"

"To shut out sound," returned the lady of Clyffe, in the same sort of tone that the wolf used when he made the opposite remark to Red Ridinghood—"The better to hear with, my dear."—"You should not object to that, brother. There are a good many baize-doors at the Dene."

If the object of this observation was to console, it certainly failed in its effect. With terror-stricken visage, Clement watched his sister light the huge wax-candles upon the dressing-table, and likewise those upon the lofty mantelpiece, until, what with that stately lustre, and the huge wood fire upon the hearth, the whole apartment looked designed for some dead Clyffard to lie in state in."

"Where do you and your husband sleep, Grace?" inquired he, retaining the cold white hand, which would have bidden him adieu, within his own.

"In the east wing, at the other end of the castle."

"Oh, indeed; and, by-the-bye, if I should be ill in the night—I don't feel very well now—and should want Cator, where does *he* sleep, Grace?"

"I cannot tell, Clement; but probably over the stable with the grooms. You *would* be lodged in the best bed-room, you know, so you must put up with its little disadvantages. The great folks who have slept here have always had there own attendants about them in the ante-room yonder and in the page's chamber. There is not even a bell except the alarm-bell"—she pointed to a massive silken cord hanging through a round hole

in the ceiling close to the bed-head—"which, should you ring, it would arouse half Craven. Yet even that did not save Sir Thomas. He was found lying stark and stiff here, stabbed to the heart, with his hand outstretched in vain for yonder rope, though ten score of men-at-arms would have answered his summons. Good-night, brother."

She spoke in a harsh and grating voice, but Clement was very loath to lose the sound of it. He accompanied her through the triple door with officious courtesy.

"I suppose I shall be called in time, Grace?"

"Yes, you will be called—soon enough, doubtless. You had better not come with me any further, or you will lose your way back to your chamber." She waved her hand, and left him with a firm, unfaltering step, which evoked its answering footfall from the other end of the passage—that nearest to the Blue Chamber—as before.

"Good-night!" cried he, his teeth chattering with fear, as he listened with positive anxiety to hear once more her familiar accents.

"Good-night," answered she sardonically, as she opened the great door which led into the picture-gallery—"good-night, and pleasant dreams." The quilted door shut behind her with little noise, but her words were repeated by the mocking echoes quite close, as it seemed, to his own ears—"Good-night, and pleasant dreams."

CHAPTER IX.

MR. CLEMENT CARR HAS A BAD NIGHT.

It has been recorded by inconsiderate admirers of Admiral Lord Nelson, that he never knew what fear was ; if so, he must be held to have been a very fortunate person, but by no means a courageous one ; for true courage can no more exist without sense of danger, than true charity without self-denial ; otherwise, the boldest man in Christendom must have been the Hibernian wood-cutter who sat upon the top-branch of the elm-tree, while he himself was sawing it off ; and the bravest corps that could be enrolled for any warlike purpose would be one selected from those who had made the most determined attempts at suicide, and who were rather in love with death than in terror of him. Persons of this callous description might really be utilised to great advantage for assassinating tyrants, or firing powder-magazines from within ; but though they might be called patriots, it is doubtful whether posterity, who is the law-lord that settles all claims to such titles, would term them heroes. Now, any bravery which Mr. Clement Carr might possess was of a sort that could not be questioned, when looked at from this point of view. He was by no means ignorant of the nature of fear, but, on the contrary, enjoyed a more delicate appreciation of it than falls to the lot of most men—and even women. He could bear to see a fellow-creature suffer any amount of pain, physical or mental, without

losing his own presence of mind at all ; his spirit was indomitable and unflinching in that respect to quite an extraordinary degree ; but there his courage ceased. If the pain touched *himself*, his skin was sensitive ; if danger threatened, something quailed within him, which he erroneously supposed to be his heart, and his knees had a knack of coming together, which they had certainly not acquired from any habit of devotion. As Mrs. Clyffard had hinted, it had fallen to Clement's lot in life (and he had not repined at it) to shut up a good many persons in desolate rooms with double and even treble doors, designed to exclude sound : in cold and darkness, in hunger and nakedness, he had doomed many to pass just such a long autumn night as now lay before him ; and yet, although he was full of wine and meat, and his apartment was light and even brilliant, and a feather-bed huge enough to accommodate Mr. Brigham Young and half-a-dozen of his consorts, was wooing him to slumber, yet he felt very far from comfortable.

The room was warm but he shivered like any of those poor wretches whom he had so often beaten, with the humane view (as he humorously told them) of promoting their circulation. He hated and despised them—all the more, perhaps, because from them he drew his means of livelihood—but now, in his splendid solitude, he would not have been sorry for even such company as theirs. Night—solitary night—was always hateful to Clement ; he sometimes dared to think that the terrors which he habitually suffered at that season, might be some set-off, in the awful future, against what, by a stretch of severity, might possibly be considered his crimes. And yet he envied his brother Gideon—an indubitably wicked man, harsh and cruel, with nothing genial (such as the skilful imitation of animal noises) about him—who never, by night or day, felt one moment's remorse for the past, one touch of fear for the present. It was probable, indeed, that his death-bed would be a lesson. Clement, who was much the younger, rather looked forward to that, as the starting-place upon a better course of life for

himself ; he would be a richer man then, and could afford to be better ; and, moreover, it would be then time to begin to think about such matters—but in the meanwhile, what a blessed thing it seemed to be brave like Gideon ! Not to fear God—no, he, didn't mean that ; he really didn't—his cringing mind made base apology, ere the black thought had wigned its way across it—but *not* to fear man or devil ! Surely such a bold heart as that must be a great possession. Mr. Clement Carr could not conceal from himself (nor, indeed, from other people) that he *did* fear man—and this very brother Gideon above all men ; and if he did not do his very best to escape the clutches of the foul fiend, it was not because he did not fear *him*. He feared the prince of the powers of the darkness very much, as likewise the powers themselves—ghosts, spectres, portents, warnings, and as he called them, jestingly, and in the daytime, “crawley-crawlies” of all kinds.

It was not the daytime now, nor was 11 P.M. an hour for jesting. At 11 o'clock A.M. he had replied, as we know, to Cator, speaking about the very apartment he was now occupying : “Who kairsh for the ghost ? I shall shleep in the besh room.” To what a different frame of mind had twelve hours brought him ! Had he only a bottle of brandy, his former audacious sentiments might perhaps be induced to return. The servants had not yet retired for the night. Why should he not ring, and, upon pretence of sudden indisposition, demand that cordial ? But had not his sister told him that there was no bell to ring except—— His eyes wandered to the spot where, a few minutes ago, she had pointed to him the massive rope of the alarm-bell hanging by the bedside. It was not a thing to escape even a very cursory glance, yet all his looking for it was now in vain ; it was not there at all, and nothing remained to tell of it save the round dark hole in the ceiling, through which it must have been withdrawn, watching the pillow of Sir Thomas's deathbed like a baleful eye. Upon this depressing discovery, Mr. Clement Carr's first impulse was to leave the apartment forthwith, and demand lodgment

with Mr. William Cator, even though he should become a laughing-stock to that strong-minded individual to the end of his days; but the truth was, he dared not face the echoing passage, and the long gallery of frowning Clyffards, through which he must needs pass before he could come within call of any human being. His next idea was to render himself as safe as might be from the incursion of any ghostly enemy in his present quarters. To this end he made a thorough inspection of the whole apartment with a wax-candle in each hand, like the manager of a theatre showing Majesty the way to its box. Besides the triple door by which he had entered, there were two other doors, and when he opened these he exchanged one of the candles for a poker. The first led into an ante-room as large as any ordinary bed-room, but totally unfurnished, save for some things which looked uncommonly like coffin trestles, but which were doubtless the raw material of truckle-beds, to be used by the attendants of the great man who reposed in the Blue Chamber; other doors led from this room, he knew not whither, but he cut off all communication with it by lock and bolt. The second door opened upon a very small room, almost a recess, the purpose of which he could not guess; if it was for the accommodation of a page, it must have been a very duodecimo one that slept there. It would have served rather as a wardrobe for cloaks and hats, only there were no pegs; the shining floor was uncarpeted, and in the centre was a square, looking suspiciously like a trap-door. Doubtless, the persons who had murdered Sir Thomas had come up that way, while his servants guarded the ante-room in vain. Again Mr. Clement Carr plied lock and bolt; and having in the same manner made his triple door secure, felt even then no safer than Robinson Crusoe with his ladders drawn up, upon the day when he first saw the footprint in the sand.

How was it possible he should be comfortable with that round hole staring at him through the ceiling? Moreover, the fire was dying out, and there was no fresh fuel. Mr. Clement looked at the four candles, wishing

them four-and-twenty, and proceeded to put two of them out, for it was necessary to husband his resources, lest the night should be rendered still more hideous by darkness. First, however, at the imminent risk of reducing Clyffe Hall to ashes, Mr. Carr pushed a lighted candle under the bed, and examined every article of furniture with the particularity of a broker; then having sounded the walls minutely, which fully maintained their reputation of being sixteen feet thick, he began to flatter himself that there was not much to be afraid of after all. For with respect to ghostly enemies, it is singular enough that we take precisely the same precautions against them as against material foes, such as burglars, and that even the most superstitious of us would prefer a lock upon his bed-room door to a horse-shoe, and the charms of a revolver to those of the most accredited exorcist. Mr. Clement Carr pursued his nightly toilet with not a few uncomfortable lookings-back over his shoulder; and having wrapped his dressing-gown around him, took a chair by the enormous fireplace, and proceeded to warm his stockinged feet at the fast-waning embers, before he got into bed.

This is a position in which nobody has ever yet indulged without falling into what is called a "brown study." As the wood-fire glows and pales, as the sparks come forth and vanish, so the memories of the past, now distinct, now dim, follow one another without our guidance, or schemes for the future shape themselves as the clouds before the wind. There are none of us but have a history, more deeply interesting to ourselves than all the scrolls of fame, and we love to linger over the pictures it presents, "rolling the sweet morsel under the tongue"—even when we are well aware that it would have been better for us had some of them remained unpainted. It would have been well for Clement Carr had the long canvas of his past been white and recordless as the minds of those poor wretches whom it was his calling to tend, so ugly were the scenes displayed well-nigh from first to last as it unrolled, and yet it gave him pleasure to review them—although not all. He remembered with gloomy

satisfaction the circumstances under which their first patient had been confided to their care, and how the hush-money got to be larger every year—only a little less than blood-money, and almost as ill-earned; and how, having thus discovered a short way to wealth, they had stuck to it, Gideon and he, though the road was dark and foul, and in places perilous; very dangerous, indeed, when Gilbert Lee, whose mad idea that he was sane had been so shared in by Mildred's mother, that she plotted his escape from the Dene, and afterwards married him. Perhaps, after all, that marriage saved the Carr system from unpleasant publicity; but how he hated his dead sister, and her dead husband, and the living offspring of the two, who had treated him so superciliously that very evening! She should smart for that yet, if opportunity occurred, which it generally does, when we have our revenges to gratify. Then, on the other hand, what a match had Grace made! He loved her, it is true, no better than her elder sister, but he couldn't help being proud of her. How well contrived must have been all those pretended attentions to mad Cyril, directed in reality at Ralph himself, to have so bewitched the Clyffard, even at a spot so hateful to him by association as the Dene. How many ladies of high degree had striven for that prize, and failed! How many women in other days, as beautiful as she, and better born, had ruled at Clyffe by a far different title!

There was the "fair lady," for instance, for whose sake Bertram slew his brother. Cator had pointed out to him that day where oak had been laid on the great staircase, to hide the blood-stained spot where Gervaise Clyffard fell; and yet, enchantress as she was, she had been the wife of neither. It was she who was said to "walk," combing her long tresses as she went, when any great calamity threatened the family; and it had been even whispered that the Master of Clyffe had been, but a few nights back, forewarned, by her appearance, of his brother Cyril's death. That was a bad business for him (Clement) as well as Gideon. A great annual sum had been paid for many years for his custody, which

would no longer swell the Carr revenues, unless, indeed, another Clyffard should be sent to take his place. More unlikely things, however, than that might happen, and truly, as Cator was used to say, "Miss Grace as was was a very clever woman." Still, unless it was to her own advantage, she would never move in the matter; she was all for herself was Grace. Gideon, it is true, sometimes got her to do things—but for him (Clement), she would not wag a finger—and even Gideon had always to give her a *quid pro quo*. What scheme had she now in hand with this girl Mildred? She surely could hardly dream of a *double* alliance with the Clyffard family! and besides, why should she benefit one to whose dead parents she owed such a grudge? She had been more angry at their marriage than even he or Gideon, and why then did she patronise and protect this girl, and ask her to Clyffe, and set her up—confound her—above her own——

Here an incident occurred which put a stop to Mr. Clement Carr's "brown study," and made him very wide awake indeed to the fact that he was in the Blue Chamber at Clyffe Hall. It was simply a sigh, it is true, but a sigh of the profound sort, such as is produced only by the most heartfelt sorrow, or the most complicated troubles of the digestion—a sigh that filled the room with its melancholy monotone, and was uttered, as it seemed, by some invisible being close beside him, who might have been warming *his* legs by the self-same decaying fire, preparatory to retiring to the self-same bed. So certain was Mr. Clement Carr of the proximity of the sound, that he did not even cast a glance up at the hole in the ceiling, from whence it might naturally have been expected to proceed, but sat glued to his chair, with his hair on end, carrying, *nem. con.*, in his own mind, all sorts of resolutions for living a spotless life for the remainder of his days. He had no more reason to doubt of this thing having occurred (as, indeed, it *had* occurred) than that he was sitting by the mere remnants of a wood fire, and that the oak floor had no carpet, and would presently grow cold to his feet; yet

such is the marvellous elasticity of the human mind, that, when the sound was not repeated, the idea began to grow within him that, after all, it might only have been a creation of his fancy, or that perhaps it had been his own sigh that he had heard. People often sighed without knowing it ; nothing was more——

With one agile spring, which must have taxed every muscle of his ponderous body, Mr. Clement Carr here bounded into bed ; for the sigh had again broken forth, and this time most certainly not from his own fluttering heart, although almost as near. Let us not bear too hardly upon this unhappy man. Mr. Banting himself, previous to his miraculous discovery, would have done his best to “jump” under similar circumstances. “There are few things,” says a standard writer, “more appalling than a sound of which we can give no explanation.” There is no wonder, then, that Mr. Carr sat listening for more sighs, with a thumping in his ear like that of a steam-engine. After an hour or so of this frightful state of anticipation, he ventured to relieve his stiffened limbs by lying down ; then, still listening, and with the engine still beating within, but with fainter strokes, drowsiness fell upon him, and presently blessed sleep, that falls, like the rain of heaven, even upon the most unjust, and holds them (let us hope), while it lasts, as innocent as the best of us.

When he awoke, which he did suddenly, and to the consciousness of all the horrors of his situation, the room was no longer illumined by artificial light, but dimly by the moon. The fire had, of course, gone out, but the two candles which had been left burning on the mantelpiece, although no longer lit, had certainly not burned out, for there they stood as high, it seemed, as when he had last seen them. While he wondered much at this phenomenon, Mr. Clement’s attention was called to the dressing-table by a third sigh, quite equal to its predecessors in depth of feeling. Before the glass sat a female form, in a loose black robe, engaged upon some article of needle-work. Her features could scarcely be discerned, but her figure was youthful, and her auburn

hair flowed over her shoulders like a river of gold. Well might she sigh, considering the task she was engaged upon. An enormous piece of linen lay upon her lap, its whiteness contrasting forcibly with her black dress; the moonbeams exhibited this but a few moments ere thick darkness closed the scene; yet even in that scanty time, Clement Carr knew that he had seen the Phantom of Clyffe—the Fair Lady sewing a shroud. To be alone with this spectre, without light, without knowing how near she might be to him, and yet to know that she was there, he felt to be absolutely intolerable, and the wretched man gathered himself up with the courage of despair for a rush at the triple door; but just as he was in act to spring, the whole floor of the room seemed, with one ponderous crash, to give way together, and, shrinking from the unknown abyss, Clement Carr fell back upon his pillow, and fainted from sheer extremity of terror.

CHAPTER X.

EAVES-DROPPING.

WHEN Mr. Clement Carr "came to himself," he came to himself alone; it was broad daylight too, and cheerful sounds of life—such as the champing of horses and the clanking of milk-pails—came up from some region beneath. But the shock had been too severe for the effects of it to be removed from Clement's system by any ordinary means. All he saw only reminded him of what he had suffered. There were the grey embers of the wood-fire beside which he had shuddered at the mysterious sigh; the empty chair on which the Fair Lady had sat beside the toilet-table engaged in her ghastly occupation; the polished floor, apparently as safe and solid as ice after three weeks' frost, but which he scarcely dared to set his feet upon, after the proof he had so lately experienced of its instability. All the doors were locked just as he had left them, with their keys inside, and yet he had seen what he had seen.

Shaving was a difficult matter with Mr. Carr that morning, and a very woe-begone countenance he presented to the looking-glass. I do not say that his hair had turned grey in that single night—although I have known such an occurrence to happen in the case of a gentleman who unexpectedly left off wearing a wig—but he unquestionably looked like one who had passed a very bad night indeed. Mr. Carr concealed his features from the servant who called him that morning, by means of a

pocket-handkerchief, but he could not be making a pretence of blowing his nose the whole day long. Thus, happening, upon his way in search of Cator, with orders to prepare for their immediate departure from that accursed roof, to meet Mr. Raymond Clyffard at the library door, that gentleman, after a stiff greeting, could not but remark, "I fear, Sir, you have slept but ill."

"Ill is no word for it, Mr. Raymond; I've—— But perhaps it is not agreeable to the family to talk about such things."

"Come in here, Mr. Carr," said the young man, ushering him into the common home of arms and literature. "Now, sit you there, and tell me what has disturbed you."

He pointed to a high-backed chair, carved thick with hounds and hunters, in which poor Clement looked like the sham-governor of Barataria; while he himself, toying with an antique goblet of very curious workmanship, stood leaning against a mighty tome of black-letter—such as Don Quixote would have loved—and listened.

Not one word did Raymond utter throughout the other's somewhat long and rambling narrative; but when he had quite finished, he quietly observed, "Tis a strange story, Mr. Carr, and more than strange if true."

"True, Sir!"

"Nay, I mean no offence; you may lie, and yet not know it. You took claret enough last night to raise a dozen ghosts."

"Mr. Raymond Clyffard," returned Clement with that unmistakably earnest air with which a man who is not an habitual truth-teller narrates a genuine fact, "I saw the Fair Lady of your house last night, and no other, as surely as that is a drinking-cup which you are holding in your hand, and nothing else."

"As surely," replied Raymond smiling, "but not more so. Mark, now, how the eye may be deceived. This is indeed a goblet, in a sense; but see—I tilt it ever so little, and this trigger lets loose a pistol-ball which smites the drinker dead. This is the stirrup-cup of the good old

times, in which not to pledge one's host at parting, was to offend him grievously. And yet, in truth, it is a mere show of wickedness. There is no precision in a thing like this. If the bullet sped at all, I wager it would fly aslant. But the common mind delights to think it deadly; and because we have possession of such weapons, and because the house is old, and crimes and vice have played their parts in it, as needs must be in any house so old, hence come these vulgar tales of apparitions, noises—things you think you see or hear."

"I saw them and I heard them," answered Clement obstinately; "there was no 'think' about it."

"Then let there be no talking about it either, Sir," said Raymond sternly. "We have had too much of such fooling. If it be your pleasure to leave Clyffe Hall so soon——"

"This very morning," quoth Clement resolutely.

"Then let me beg of you in courtesy not to repeat—at least not within these walls—what you have just told to me. I will do what I can to fathom the mystery, and be sure, if I discover anything, that you shall know it."

Clement gave the required promise with some show of frankness, and left the room, observing that he had business with his servant, and must needs go in person, for that he wished to see how his horse fared, which had shown signs of suffering from his recent journey.

"A liar to the backbone," muttered Raymond Clyffard, "and I, a fool, to appeal to the honour of such a rogue! And yet he seemed to speak the truth a while ago—ah, Mildred, dearest!"

They were very like, those two; as like as youth and girl could be! The one swarthy as night, with lustrous starlike eyes; the other as the mellow eve, what time the nightingale begins his melody, and the glow-worm trims her lamp to light her love.

"Hush!" said she, closing the door behind her softly, and laying her finger on her lips; "in this room, Raymond, never speak so loud. Nay, no room is safe, nowhere but Ribble."

"Let us go to Ribble, then."

"Not now. I dare not do it. I sought you here to warn you—I wish I could say aid you—my own Raymond."

She lingered on her words, as the lark lingers over her own sweet song, and gazed upon him, and then drooped her eyelids, like one who, looking at the sun, is blinded with excess of light, yet longs to look again.

"What is it, Mildred, dear? More schemes, more stratagems? Why, this good woman your aunt is busier than a spider."

"Ay, and as fell, as ruthless. When she works *me* harm—I fear her—ah, how I fear her!—but now that she is plotting against *you*, Raymond, I seem to fear her no more; I *hate* her. She has poisoned your poor father's mind against you."

"She did that long ago, Mildred," sighed the young man.

"Ay, but not to the bitter end, as now. She aims at nothing less than to get you expelled from this roof, that she may reign here the more supreme. She swung her first mesh across but yesterday—she told me so herself—and day by day her net will grow, I know; and Raymond—I—she——"

Mildred paused, and as the glory of the fruit of Tangiers shews through its scented rind, so did her blushes rise.

"She is not going to send *you* away, Mildred?" interposed her lover anxiously. "If so, I shall believe, indeed, that the Fair Lady prognosticates misfortune."

"What mean you? Have you seen her?"

"Nay, not *I*, i'faith; but this man Carr, your uncle—God save the mark!—has seen, or so he says, the warning but last night in the Blue Chamber. All the doors were locked, and yet a lady with long auburn hair, and in a black dressing-gown, intrudes herself, and practises plain needle-work. This he will carry to his sister, she to my father, and we know with what dire effect. He will deem it bodes another death."

"In a black dressing-gown," mused Mildred Leigh; "with auburn hair; and in the state-room too. Did Mr. Carr say anything had happened to the floor?"

"Ay, the fool swore that all the floor fell in."

"Dear Raymond," said the young girl earnestly, "I see some sunlight where I looked not for it : you are not yet turned out of your own home. If I am not mistaken, Aunt Grace is playing a very dangerous game. I will watch her narrowly, and, if she has no mercy for *thee*, so help me Heaven, I will shew none to *her*. She gave me *thee*, it is true, a priceless gift, but never meant to give ; and now——"

"Now what, dear Mildred ? What is it that threatens you, and therefore me ? And how can anything that happened in the Blue Chamber help us ?"

"It is a long story, Ray, and this is neither the time nor the place to tell it. There is darkest plotting, and we must counterplot. At three o'clock meet me at the mouth of Ribble Cave—then——"

"I hear the cat," exclaimed Raymond softly. "Puss, puss, puss !"

The door opened ; Mrs. Clyffard entered, and darting a suspicious glance from one to the other, observed coldly, "Mildred, the breakfast waits ; go make the tea, child." The young girl left the room.

"Mr. Raymond Clyffard, I am directed by your father——"

"Nay, Madam," interrupted he with mock politeness ; "my father has been directed by you."

"Has been directed by *me*, then, if you will have it so," continued his step-mother carelessly, "to request, if your sporting engagements will permit of it, that you will partake his evening meal with him."

"My father is very kind," said Raymond frankly ; he had not had such an invitation for many months, and he was greatly pleased.

"Very kind," repeated Mrs. Clyffard, icily. "I hope you will prove yourself deserving of his kindness."

"We shall be alone, I conclude, Mrs. Clyffard ?" inquired Raymond, his suspicions roused by the sarcastic tones of his step-mother.

"Oh, quite alone, Sir ; and I thank you for the implied compliment. No envious eyes will witness your in-

teresting interview; no alien ear will overhear your generous confidences."

"Then we shall meet in some room which has no keyhole," remarked Raymond scornfully, and with his hand upon the door. "If you have no other commands, Madam, I will rid you of my presence."

In silence they interchanged one look of mutual defiance, the man's eye flashing contempt, the woman's hatred, and then the oak door closed between them.

"I listen, do I?" muttered the woman to herself. "You have found out so much, have you? He calls me cat, and that to Mildred, too. Why were they here together at all? She dare not love him—no, she dare not, for her life. She knows that I would kill her if she did. And yet they were making tryst. 'At the mouth of Ribble Caves at three.' The cat caught that at least."

CHAPTER XI.

RUPERT'S WOOING.

WHEN Mildred reached the chamber where Mrs. Clyffard and herself were accustomed to take their morning meal together, she found Rupert awaiting her. It was strange enough to see him there, for, to her knowledge, he had not set foot within that room three times since she had been at Clyffe; but it was worse than strange, since her aunt must needs have sent her thither to meet him. How different he looked from his brother, whom she had just left; the one bright, strong, and joyous, the other sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought. And yet he was fair to look upon; his wealth of light-brown hair crowned a noble forehead; his well-cut features showed his gentle birth; while the deep-sunk eyes he fixed upon her with melancholy longing were very soft and kind.

"Mildred," said he frankly, "your aunt has bid me hither for a purpose which it will not be hard for you to guess, remembering what has already passed between us. For my part, I would fain have deferred to press a suit which has so lately met with coldness, if not rejection; but she says I do not know the way to a maiden's heart. My wooing, mayhap, has been inapt and clumsy?"

"Nay, Rupert; you have been courteous and gentle in your love, as in all else. Never was homage from a

noble heart more nobly proffered. No girl could hope to have a wooer more——”

“Words, words, words,” interrupted Rupert wearily, “all ending in a ‘but,’ as at the bottom of the sparkling bowl the poison lurks. I thought—but it was she who bade me think—that this time something else than pity, Mildred——”

“Pity, Rupert?”

“Ay, for you must pity me, since I think that you do not hate me, and alas! you do not give me back love for love. You see me—what I am; a youth, yet very sad; one rich in this world’s goods, yet poor beyond the poorest, since you refuse to share them. And yet you see not half my evil case, and know not half what it is in your power to confer. Look you. If a man like me besought your hand in marriage, and you loved him not, yet if, besides, he lay in peril of his life, and could only by your wedding him be saved—would you wed him then, for pity’s sake, if not for love’s, hoping that love would come?”

“Such a thing could not be, Rupert. It is idle to speak of it.”

“But if it *were*, I say. What then?”

“I would do my very best to save him.”

“You *would*!” cried Rupert joyfully. “God bless you for those words! One kiss, sweet Mildred—nay, pardon me; I had forgotten; my soul is drunk with love. How my heart beats—how my brain whirls! Pent up within these walls, I suffocate. How cool and calm you moat looks! Will you take boat with me, and let me row you round the castle walls, as I have often done before, and tell you there, where you have listened to so many tales of mine, but none so pitiful as this, the thing I have to say?”

Never was man so changed in such brief space as Rupert while he spoke these words; his pale cheeks glowed with pleasure; his large eyes beamed with hope; his head, which thought and study were wont to bow, was held erect.

It pained Mildred to the core to say, “You are clinging

to a shadow, Rupert. Though your talk is unintelligible to me, I feel you are encouraging a baseless hope." Yet she did say it bravely.

"But you *will* come?" cried he, no whit discouraged by her words. "You will hear what I have to say? But stay—you have not yet breakfasted. Alas! what a selfish wretch I am!"

"I could not eat, Rupert, just now. I am quite ready to hear what you have to say, although I warn you it will be useless pleading."

They wound down a private stair to a low arched door that opened on the castle terrace, then betwixt the grey wall, teeming with fruit, and the lichen-covered balusters, whereon the peacock strutted and flirited his feathers in the sun, they walked side by side; down the broad stone steps, bordered with scarlet flowers in massy urns on to the shaven lawn, and so to the brink of the black moat, all starred by water lilies. Here they took boat, and Rupert oared him to the middle of the sluggish stream, then rested on his oars, and broke the autumn silence.

"Dear Mildred, I have looked forward to this hour for many and many a day. *Here*, I have often thought often when we were together, but as boy and girl, brother and sister, not as now—I will one day tell her all: here where we have passed whole summer days, and she has seen me at my best and merriest (if, indeed, I have been ever merry), seems the fittest place. Nor sea nor stream can ever be so dear to me as this same moat; alone I have listened here for hours to the croak of the slow-flapping rook, and the cock-crow, half-choked, half-clear, from the distant farm, and never wished for better music. But that was before I heard your voice, sweet Mildred!" Here he paused a moment, then resumed reflectively, "How slowly the waters creep, as though they loved to linger about this ancient place, and were loath to leave it for the hurrying river; and yet, see, they are dark as death, and the bottom is choked with trailing weeds. So has it been with the Clyffards themselves, Mildred. We have kept ourselves so long

from the great tide of life, that we have grown stagnant, and—and—what is stagnant is unhealthy. Where there is nothing to hasten the pulse, to stir the blood, the mind itself will sooner or later grow”—he was looking at her, she felt, so fixedly that she dared not raise her eyes to meet his gaze—“will grow—lethargic.”

“*You* are not lethargic, Rupert.”

“Not yet,” said he; “I trust not yet.”

There was a pathos in his low, earnest tone, that might have almost moved a slighted woman; no wonder, then, that it pierced Mildred’s heart.

“Dear Rue,” she murmured, “it is not well to speak of such things as these.”

“But how much worse,” sighed he, “to think of them, and not to speak. Oh, do not think that I am hoodwinked, Mildred, by aught that men can say or leave unsaid about poor me. I know the falseness of their assuring speech, as I know the reason of their silence—their ‘Hush! Rupert is coming; not one word about the curse.’”

“Rue, Rue, dear Rue,” sobbed Mildred tenderly, “this is the very thing you should not do, the very talk——”

“Nay, Mildred, hear me out. Oh, do not join them in that cuckoo-note. Oh, do not you turn against me my one hope.”

“Against you, Rupert? *I—I?* When there is not a groom in Clyffe that does not love you?”

“Ay; but not as I would have *you* love. And if you turn not *to* me, Mildred, you will work more against me than if all the world besides had sworn my ruin. Oh, how to tell you—how to let you know what hangs upon your answer, and yet not fright you, Mildred! Nay, tremble not, sweetest; you have nought to fear, whether your ‘yes’ shall bathe my life in sunshine, or your ‘no’ provoke the threatening moon to swift eclipse!”

His tones were earnest, but not wild; and though far from mechanically, he spoke as one who has well conned beforehand the substance of what he has to say.

“You are very young,” said Mildred after a little, “and yet have lived your life here amid the mouldering

past, afar from all things that befit the young. Your childhood, soon deprived of a mother's care—like mine, Rupert—has been passed among menials, who, flattering themselves they were pleasing you, pleased their own vulgar natures by feeding an imagination, hungry as flame, with stories of your ancient house, exaggerated, false and monstrous histories, but which, since they were about the Clyffards, seemed in some sort real. They sowed an evil seed in a soil fertile enough in fancies of its own, but rich and ready to the hand of the true husbandman, had such there been. How soon would yonder well-trimmed garden left to itself become mere wilderness, and how much sooner if you planted it with docks and darnels ? ”

“ Go on, sweet Mildred ; these are Raymond's words, but in your mouth how welcome—welcome as the dawn—welcome as the soft-falling summer rain upon the aching head and stretched-out hands.”

“ Raymond is wise, Rupert, although he has little book-learning.”

“ I know it, girl, yet he cannot comfort me as you can. The uneasy pillow of the sick man cannot be smoothed save by one loving hand ; and royal Edward's wound, be sure, would not have healed so swiftly had any lips sucked forth the poison save those of his true wife.” Then pausing for a moment, he added in an earnest whisper, “ There is poison in *my* blood, Mildred, and you must be my Eleanor.”

“ Nay, Rupert ; there is no poison in your blood, but, as you said yourself, it flows too sluggishly ; you need employment, action—you should leave home a while.”

“ What ! ” he broke forth, “ without *you* ? Never—no, never, Mildred ! Be mine, and I will go with you whither you will, and do your bidding, whatsoever it be. But I will never leave you, be sure of that, my girl ; you shall escape me never, no, not in death itself ; for if you die, then will I die too, and climb up after you to highest heaven, though it were from the abyss of hell. *Then* surely, being a blessed spirit crowned and palmed, you would reach out a saintly hand to lift me into bliss, and save my soul ; and therefore *now*, being an earthly

angel, will you not give me that same hand, and save—
ah, save *my reason*?”

The dews of terror stood upon Mildred's brow, for wild and vehement as was Rupert's speech, his eyes spoke things more terrible. All of a sudden she knew that that which she had been combating for his sake as a mere shadow, was a substantial evil which had already fallen upon him. Poor Rupert had all along been right; she was talking with a madman! And yet she pitied him far more than feared him even now. The passionate yearning of his last appeal melted her heart within her.

“The case I put in yonder room,” he continued, “was my own—for is not madness death?—and hence my soul was glad as yonder bird's what time you said, ‘I would do my very best to save him.’ Come, Mildred, say you will once more.”

The feathered thief in view of the fruit upon the terrace-wall was carolling his blithest; note on note he poured forth his melodious joy a while, then bringing his last harmonies together, like a hasty grace, he flew down to the ripening pears. Then in the songless silence Mildred answered Rupert, “So help me Heaven, I will do my very best to save you.” She spoke not without thought—for while a blackbird sings is time enough to serve a nimble brain—and while she spoke she watched him narrowly.

“My life, my love, my all!” murmured he in a hushed rapture.

“But Rupert——”

“Nay,” he interrupted; “mar not the music of your last rich words. I guess what you would say, and therefore there is no need to speak. You do not love me yet—I know it, but in time 'tis possible—— There, there, I *give* you time—I can keep my soul in patience, being sure of you; hopeful that the bud of pity may flower into something sweeter, and being sure that when it does so bloom, it blows for *me*—for *me*!”

Across his voice, faint and aswoon with love, came Mrs. Clyffard's clear and peremptory tones from the

balcony outside her breakfast-room, "Mildred, the breakfast waits, dear child. Good Rupert, put her ashore."

The young man obeyed at once, and as he took Mildred's fingers in his own to hand her to the bank, he gave them a significant squeeze. Far from returning this, she bowed to him haughtily, and walked hastily away.

"Ungenerous!" murmured she to herself, almost in tears, "and unlike a gentleman! I could not have believed it of a Clyffard. Not mad, indeed, but cunning as the maddest; had love been mine to give, I verily believe he would have won it. False and unfair! Does he suppose I took his dropped kerchief for a water-lily, or that I was blind to her answering signal? And did she ever speak to us like that before?—'dear Mildred,' and 'good Rupert!' My loving aunt must take me for a fool indeed."

CHAPTER XII.

RIBBLE CAVE.

THE hills about Craven, if they are not mountains in the eyes of members of the Alpine Club, are believed to be such by the inhabitants of the district, who (one would think) ought to know. At all events, they are very high hills indeed for poor England, which has of late years been understood to be a flat country. The boastful local proverb—

Penyghent, Pendle, and Ingleborough,
Are the *highest* hills the country thorough—

is not, indeed, quite correct. In Mr. Hurtle's *Craven*, the height of Ingleborough, as measured by "a famous pedestrian"—we should imagine Mr. Walker—is given at five thousand two hundred and eighty feet, or about two thousand feet higher than Helvellyn; but this is a slight exaggeration. Like a county magnate who lives close to the Lord Lieutenant, the Craven hills are minified by the neighbourhood of their high mightinesses the lords of lakeland, by many of which they are overtopped. Still, as I have said, they are very lofty, and command a great range of view. From the crown of Ribble, for instance, there was (and is) a splendid view. To westward lay the unchangeable sea, flecked by many a sail as now, although no smoke-pennon flew from steamship; while over the perilous sand-road athwart Morecambe Bay you might see, when

the tide was low, great companies of people, both on horseback and in wheeled conveyances, where now there are but a very few. How picturesque those little caravans must have looked as they crossed the waste of sand, which in a few hours the swirling sea would devour, silent and swift; how lovely that level way, from which every trace of man's travel was swept away every day! Then the crescent bays, white as the moon, with the boats lying high and dry in them; the belts of woodland descending to the very water's edge; and Kent and Leven sweeping from the rich green hills in many a shining curve! The top of Ribble was also a sight in itself, having a shaven crown where a Druidical circle once had stood—a very priest of hills; and yet were none of these glories to be compared with the wondrous wealth which lay within him. I do not speak of the gold and silver coins—centuries old—which in flood-time one of his streams would cast out (as it does yet) from some far-hidden treasury, but of the glittering palace, built, doubtless, for the king of the fairies, but which had lapsed for many a year into mortal hands, and was termed by them Ribble Cave.

Surely, of all discoveries which have power to charm the human soul, that of a stalactite cavern must be the chiefest. To be the first to descry a new continent, or even an island unmarked in any chart, must be a striking sensation; the watcher of the skies, too, when a new planet “swims into his ken,” must enjoy a great experience; but neither of these sensations seems so overwhelming as that which I have in my mind. For suppose—and I am only supposing what has happened—that I have lived within the shadow of a great hill all my life, which the learned inform me is of limestone, and that my forefathers for many generations have lived by the same hill without further information about it, if so much; and suppose there is a cavern in that hill of no very interesting character, described by the authorities to be mainly “calcareous secretion,” which has been used by myself and my progenitors as a stabling for cattle in bad weather—well, during an autumn thunder-storm, I take

shelter in this spot alone, and with a pickaxe which happens to be there, I amuse or warm myself by picking into the hill. What follows? Why a mighty stream of water, from which I escape with difficulty, and which takes a quarter of an hour to rush away, and renders the neighbouring stream too big for its banks. Never since the rock of Horeb was there surely such a miracle. Awestricken, and yet delighted, I approach the aperture, which the flood has vastly enlarged, and behold—a gloom profound, a depth of darkness, I do not know how deep, but at all events space where heretofore had been thought to be solidity. Columbus, it is true, discovered solidity where there was thought to be space, but the wonder is no less because the conditions happen to be reversed. Thus far, then, Columbus and I are equal, but from this point he cannot hold a candle to me. If he could, and brought it to my newly-discovered cavern, what a treasure-house of fairyland would be revealed! “Stalactite and stalagmite,” observes the geologist pompously. Presumptuous fool! what thy dull science teaches thee is the least part of the wonder.

For how many thousand years have these columns of crystal, these sparkling and pendulous transparencies, full of hidden music, had their glorious being? For whom were these stately halls devised in darkness, and for whom furnished with such unearthly pomp? What forms, what spirits, have threaded these winding passages, carpeted with silver-sand, upon which no mortal foot since man was made has trodden save mine own? Whence springs and whither leads this sunless stream, whose murmur, pregnant with a mystery almost divine, has never fallen upon human ear before? Why should these wonders have been locked so fast, that no grateful tongue—at least of man—has ever given to God the glory of them? And was it chance that laid the secret bare at last, through me? and but for me, for thousands of years to come, would still these unimaginable splendours have been veiled from human eyes—this hill have been a hill like other hills? Somewhat after this fashion, surely, might any man speak who has made a

discovery, such as that which we are considering. Now this very thing had happened in Ribble Fell, and not so very many years before the period of which we write, as to rob it of its wonder. But people in those days—as we have had occasion to observe before—were not so enamoured of Nature as at present, and listened somewhat apathetically to any secret she might have to tell them. The glories of earth, and sea, and sky were for the most part lost upon them ; with much veneration and superstition, they were terribly at ease in the true Sion, and regarded all natural phenomena with the stoicism of savans. Two or three hundred folks had visited Ribble Cave upon its first discovery ; but by this time visitors had become rare. A professed guide to underground Ribble did indeed reside in the hamlet of Clyffe ; but if he had not followed some other calling in addition, he would have made but an indifferent livelihood. Not above a dozen times that summer had he been seen escorting strangers through the park upon their way to the cave. The entrance to it was just beyond the deer-fence, and where the fell commenced ; a wild and desolate spot, where a stream ran down a deep and woodless ravine, with Ribble upon one side with its subterranean palace, and on the other a still loftier hill, whose “pastures,” separated by natural walls of limestone, presented the appearance of a gigantic fortification.

Here, at the hour appointed, Mildred and Raymond met. She had more than once visited the cave, in company with members of the family ; while he was familiar with every part of it, with certain exceptions. It was known that the excavations—if such they can be called—were far more extensive than those chambers, lofty and far-stretching as they were, which visitors could explore. The stream which accompanied their steps wherever they went, had its exit at the other extremity of the hill ; and outside it, could here and there be heard, by laying the ear to the ground, flowing in places where it was known that the frequented subterranean passages did not exist. Before the pickaxe had let the light into Ribble,

such sounds had, of course, been ascribed to the devil, nor had he even now lost all the credit of them. From the main passage there forked short ones, right and left, but they all ended more or less abruptly, in some hall or grotto ; so, provided that you kept your torch alight, there was little danger of losing your way. The visitor who wished to penetrate to the extremity, had only to follow the windings of the stream, between which and the shining wall there was always room for him, and he could not fail to reach his goal—a splendid chamber, domed with glittering spars, in one dark corner of which his guide, the stream, sped away under a low-browed arch, beyond which no man, save one, had ever followed it. Raymond Clyffard alone had ventured once, with a lighted candle fastened to his forehead, to trust himself to the mysterious stream. Deep and dark it ran for a short distance, with only a few inches between the rock and it, and then emerged into a hall, more vast and beautiful—so the adventurer declared—than any it had yet visited. From hence, as it seemed to him, the stream dipped suddenly, forming a sort of cataract in a tunnel, down which, if a man should go, it was certain he would never return. It was feat enough to have visited Finis Hall, as Raymond had entitled it, and that experience had never been repeated.

Familiar, however, as both he and Mildred were with the subterranean glories of Ribble, they could not repress exclamations of delight as each, with torch in hand—the materials for exploration being always to be found in the external cave or cattle-stable—came suddenly upon some crystal wonder which flashed into being at their approach. They seemed by tacit consent to have postponed the talk which they had come hither to hold without interruption, until they had reached “the Cathedral,” as the domed chamber was not inaptly termed. Moreover, sustained conversation was rendered difficult by the nature of the way, which sometimes was so narrow that it necessitated their walking one behind the other, and sometimes was so low that they had to creep with their heads bent. It was from a sort of tunnel of this kind that they emerged

at last, after a quarter of a mile of fairyland, into the stately place that was the last of the suite of royal apartments which (I fear without King Oberon's permission) had been thrown open to the public. The two torches were not sufficient to evoke the splendours of the lofty roof; properly illuminated from beneath, it showed like a magnificent mass of candelabra, but now it only twinkled here and there, like stars out of the darkness. It seemed as though so vast a superstructure must needs have pillars for its support, and the fairy architect, as if in anticipation of such an idea, had mocked the eye with crystal columns, separated, as it seemed at first, by violence in the centre, but which had in truth never been joined; the one half rising from the silver floor, the other pendent from the crystal ceiling. From the ceiling, too, hung mighty icicles, like the pipes of an organ, which, being struck, emitted a melancholy music, that went wailing through chamber after chamber, as though in sorrow for their departed tenants. Here and there, the stalagmites took forms very similar to the human, though generally with the head or arms missing, like torsos in a sculpture-gallery; but almost in the centre of the place there was a natural statue—for it really might be called so, so perfect were its proportions—of a woman with a child in her arms; a very Lot to look at, though not of salt but crystal, and only a little above the average life-size.

"That is certainly very like," observed Mildred with a shudder, as they came upon this wonder. "Was there really any truth in the story which it is said to tell?"

"A woman and her child were lost here; that is true, and sad enough for all the truth," returned Raymond. "How they got here, without light or guide (if they did so) is strange enough, but having done so, it is small wonder that they were lost here. Although I could find my way hence, blindfold, to the outer air, almost as quickly, perhaps, as another with a torch, yet one unaccustomed to the place might easily fail to do so. The very narrowness of the way, and the close neighbourhood of the stream, which ought in reality to insure

escape, would confuse the wits of a poor terrified creature, with a little one in her arms too."

"Then Guy, you think, was not to blame?"

"I do not know, Mildred. He had enough to answer for—if a tenth of the tales about him be true—without this double murder. At all events, as the bodies were found and buried, it is impossible to adopt the vulgar story that this is the petrification of them, even if it were a petrification at all, as it manifestly is not."

"It was this imputed crime, however, that is said to have brought the curse upon the Clyffards, is it not?"

"My dearest Mildred, why be so solicitous about these *It is said*s?"

"I really have a reason for my question, Raymond."

"Well, then, it is true that from the period when this sad incident took place, five generations back—for we are but a short-lived family—the eldest son of our race has never inherited Clyffe—has always, in a word, been mad. But we came here to talk of a worse thing than madness, Mildred—of the wicked deceit of one that is in her right mind, such as it is."

"I fear so, Raymond. Nay, since I saw you, I—I almost fear that she has enmeshed Rupert."

"Nay, impossible," exclaimed the young man vehemently. "A more noble heart than Rupert's does not beat; a nature more simple, guileless——"

"And therefore," interrupted Mildred earnestly, "one only too easily made prey of. Rupert and she have some understanding between them, even now—of that I am certain. She will set brother against brother, if she can, be sure."

"She never will, Mildred. Let her hoodwink him never so much, one word from his old playmate, lover, brother—— Tush, why, the dear lad has only me to lean on; he comes to me as the very physician of his being; and while I live, he shall find me faithful, taking his love for fee, and even if not so requited, faithful still."

"Kind, generous Raymond, I am sure of that! Yet what hearts are so bound together, but that a false tongue can cut them asunder?"

"Ours, Mildred, ours," he whispered, pressing his lips to hers; and "Ours" murmured she again with loving gratitude.

"You make me happy, credulously happy, Raymond, in spite of myself. Nothing, indeed, can come between such love as ours; the very hint would make a foe of him that spoke it. But friendship however close, and though cemented by one blood, is not so firm—even a tale-bearer, a mere malicious fool, can loosen it; while little by little the serpent tongue can always sap it with its poisoned lies. A while ago, did not your father love you? Did it then seem possible that a day would come when you would welcome a summons to his private chamber merely to take his evening meal with him, with a great leap of joy, as a rare favour, as you did this very morning? And if a father's heart can be so estranged, why not a brother's?"

"'Tis justly argued, Mildred," answered the young man fondly; "and what you say is dear to me, being the logic of love; but your sweet solicitude for me makes you blind as Cupid himself. My father is an old man—alas! that I should have to say it—misruled by a young wife. But what hold can Mrs. Clyffard have on Rupert, that he should believe her, speaking lies against his own brother?"

"She may make him jealous, Raymond."

"Jealous!" echoed the young man, turning pale as the white column beside him—"jealous, of what? of whom? Not, Heaven forefend, of thee, Mildred?"

"I say not of what, dear Ray," answered she hastily; "only beware! I know not what vile plots may be going on against us. That which I do know, and which I am come here to tell, is vile enough, and may well prepare us for what might otherwise seem incredible and monstrous. The 'Fair Lady' of Clyffe, of whom such terrible things are told, at whose name your father's melancholy deepens, and your brother shudders, has only a too real existence."

"What! my Mildred superstitious? This is sad indeed."

"Nay, I do not speak of spirits, Raymond. This

Fair Lady' is Aunt Grace herself, and bodes more harm to you and yours than ever did bird or banshee."

"What mean you, Mildred?"

"I mean the very words I say. Mrs. Clyffard is trading on the foolish superstitions of your house. She has tricked your father—Heaven grant that it may not be so deeply but that he may be undeceived—not only by fostering within him the credulity that is his bane, but by masquerading, acting the very part of her of whom he stands in fear. She appears to him as that very spectre; ay, indeed she does. When she heard from her own people—and of my blood, alas, alas!—that Cyril was greatly worse, and like to die, she played the ghost to her own husband. I suspected this before; but until you told me how Clement had been frightened in the Blue Chamber, I could not be quite sure."

"And how should that make you sure, Mildred?"

"Because that room is the fittest of all for such a trick. Your father is so ready to believe the thing, and so unsuspecting of the only person who could, or would, so cruelly deceive him, that any place or time would serve her turn with him. But Clement, who believes nothing, but only fears, and who has good cause besides for mistrust of his sister, could not be fooled so easily. Now, listen, Ray. When first I came to Clyffe, my aunt, meaning, perhaps, to make me wholly hers, a willing instrument of all her plots and plans, or, partly perhaps in boast, to show how she was all in all with your poor father, disclosed to me several things which perhaps she now wishes she had concealed. Among other matters, she confided to me certain secrets of the house, unknown to either Rupert or yourself, but which had been revealed to her by your father. Let not that fret you, Ray; he doubtless kept them from you, well judging there was too much mystery about the place already. However, so it was, that while the household and yourselves knew where the priests were hid in the evil times, between the double flooring of the bed-room in the North Tower, and how the panel in the Long Gallery slides aside with grim Sir Bevis' legs upon it, yet none but the master and his

wife knew of the Priest's Chamber within the chimney of the Blue Room. A man may sound the wainscots, and fasten all the doors, and think himself secure from interlopers, and yet his enemy may be in hiding within a foot of him as he sits by the inhospitable hearth. Sir William, who was wont to lie with pistols beneath his pillow, was fallen upon and slain, she told me, by these means; and thereby, I am right sure, did Aunt Grace gain access to the Blue Room last night, and hem the sheet, which it is no wonder that her brother took for a shroud. As for the falling of the floor, Clement doubtless spoke truth in that; a hinge scarce visible, save to attentive eyes, runs across the polished planks; nay, more, the floors of the two disused rooms beneath are similarly provided, so that if the Clyffard would kill his guest, he had only to withdraw a bolt or two, and the victim fell a sheer thirty feet upon the stones of the guard-chamber. Aunt Grace knew that Clement would never have the courage to leave his bed, or she would scarcely have ventured to that length with him. She holds my memory as cheaply as my mind, else it is somewhat rash in her, being my enemy and yours, to forget that she was once my patroness, and condescended to let me know so much."

If Mrs. Clyffard could have seen this girl as her bosom rose and fell with indignant passion, and her form trembled, but not with fear, she would have despised her niece no longer, but have taken shield as well as spear. Thalestris herself was defied by the erst obedient Lampeto, when that which was dearer than her life was threatened by the imperious queen.

"Dear Ray, there is no time to lose," continued Mildred; "Aunt Grace designs to strike a blow to-night which it behoves us to anticipate. She will repeat her stage-play this very night, as I believe; and if so, we must take your father behind the scenes. At supper, strive to move him all you can; tell him how honest is your heart towards him, and how his mind is warped by evil influence from—— Hush! quiet! Heaven help us, some one has entered the cave. I saw a gleam of light yonder."

"Not so, Mildred ; you are excited, and imagine things that have no existence. I told old Angus that on visitors were to be shown the place this afternoon, under any circumstances. Well, and when I have warned my father—all in vain, I fear—what then ? "

"When you hear the great organ in the gallery play *Achieved is the Glorious Work*, bid him follow you through the turret-door and out upon the roof. Tell him that if you fail to prove your words by what he shall there behold with his own eyes, you are content to fall without the pale of his good favour for the future. Trust to me, Ray : he shall see that which will wreck his confidence in this false woman, who makes so certain of thy ruin, dear one, at once and for ever. *Then* tell him—— By Heaven, there is the light again ! I see your brother's shadow. If he finds us here together, all is lost—all, all, all ! She overheard our tryst, and has betrayed us."

"I know not the reason of your sudden terror, Mildred ; but I know you are wise and true to me," whispered Raymond in hurried but earnest accents. "All shall not be lost, love ; nor shall I be lost——"

"What ! you would not tempt that dreadful passage twice ? moreover, he would see the glimmer of thy torch."

"Ay, but not thus ;" he cast the flaming pine-branch into the dark stream, which quenched it on the instant, and plunging in himself, followed the blackened wood as it was sucked beneath the frowning arch.

Mildred uttered one sharp scream ; for her lover was gone from her, without even a farewell kiss, and now, maybe, was battling with black death : but the next instant, with a mighty effort, she decked her ghastly face with a set smile, like a counterfeit wraith upon a tombstone, and turned it to meet Rupert Clyffard.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HEIR'S SECRET.

RUPERT entered the "Cathedral" running, although necessarily at a stoop, by reason of the lowness of the adit, and casting one hasty glance at Mildred, began, without speaking, to search the vast apartment torch in hand. There was the same restless expression in his eyes, which had struck a momentary terror in the girl that very morning, combined with a passion such as she had never seen in him before. But she was not frightened now. What fear was in her was for Raymond ; was he safe in the spacious gloom of Finis Hall ? or was the relentless stream carrying his beloved form, inanimate, bruised, disfigured, into the recesses of the hill ? For the moment, she intensely hated his brother, who had thus driven him to take so perilous a step ; and perfect hate, like love, casteth out fear. Moreover, fully convinced that in concert with her wily aunt, Rupert had basely tricked her in their previous conversation, she was inclined to imagine that he was still playing a part. Although, therefore, he ran to and fro about the chamber in a strange wild way, and muttered to himself in anger, she stood firm, watching him in contemptuous silence, and when he came close to her, having thoroughly explored the place, and menacingly shaking his torch in her very face, exclaimed, "Where is he ? Where is he

hiding his false face ? ” she returned his eager look with one of scorn.

“ Who is it you seek ? ” said she. “ Whose face is it that Rupert Clyffard ventures to call “ false ? ” He who is in league with a heartless woman plotting against an unprotected girl, to steal her heart with lies. Nay, you waste your fierce looks upon me, Sir ; *I* am not your vassal ; your gentle blood I hold as nothing without gentle deeds. Why do you track me hither, and force your company upon me when I need it not ; nay, more, Sir, when I loathe it ? ”

“ He looked at her with suspicious cunning, and uttered but a single word—“ Raymond ? ”

“ He is not here,” returned she, coldly. “ You have seen for yourself, have you not ? ”

Like one upon whom conviction is forced against his will, Rupert answered peevishly. “ And yet she told me he was here.”

“ Have you never known her to tell a falsehood ? ” returned Mildred, disdainfully. “ When you dropped your kerchief in the moat to-day——”

“ Ay,” interrupted Rupert simply, and passing his hand across his forehead, “ I remember that. That was the signal we agreed upon—your aunt and I—so soon as you had given your promise to be mine, I was to drop the kerchief ; sweet Mildred—and you gave it.”

“ *I*, Rupert ? Never ! No, and I never will ! How dare you tell me to my face I did ? I do confess you fooled me with your dishonest, artful talk of ‘ Save my reason,’ so that I threw away some pity ; but my love, Sir—be sure of this—will never be so wasted ! ”

“ “ Dishonest—artful—talk,” repeated Rupert slowly. “ Do you think I made a mock of being mad ? ”

“ I do ; and that Aunt Grace set you on to do it.”

“ She ? Why, Mildred, think a little : would she not lock me up as she did Uncle Cyril, so that after murdering Raymond, all would be hers ? No ; she must never know what you shall know, love, and that now. Nobody must know Mildred—promise me that much, sweet heart ; but Mistress Clyffard and that Clement—he with the

cruel eyes—those must know least of all. Sit you down here, and listen to me a little.”

He pointed to two slabs of glittering spar, like thrones of frosted silver ; and she sat down on one, and he upon the other, close beside her. She obeyed him involuntarily ; but if she had given herself time to think, she would have obeyed him still ; the same idea had now seized upon her respecting Rupert’s sanity as had taken possession of her before ; she acquitted him of having previously deceived her ; and once more, though her heart was by no means free from fear, it had room for tenderest pity. But what made her more compliant than all was this, that while he was last speaking, she had heard a certain far-off sound which convinced her of the safety of her lover. The swooning note of an *Æolian* harp could not have been fainter ; but she knew that signal well, and her attentive ear had drunk it in—the sweetest music it had ever listened to—while Rupert, rapt in earnest speech, had not observed it.

“I will listen to you, Rupert,” said she kindly ; “but speak like your honest self, and not what another has bidden you to say.”

“Mildred,” commenced the young man slowly and sorrowfully, “I had hoped that what passed this morning between us two would have spared me the confession I have now to make. I think it must have done so, had you loved me. You would then have credited what I said, and have known that there was more—and worse to say. The dark cloud that I told you seemed about to fall upon my being—soul, heart, and brain—has fallen already. It is not even in *your* power to avert it ; but you may lift it up, Mildred. I am prison-bound, but you have the master-key—you have indeed—that can undo my fetters, and set wide the door. Shake not your beauteous head, but look upon me tenderly—ay, so, and listen to my woe, if not my love. Dear Mildred, I am mad. Start not, nor tremble, sweet heart ; I am not so mad, nor ever shall be, that I should injure *you*. Not one shining hair but being yours is sacred to me as sacramental wafer to the priest ; and as he worships it,

and treats it reverently, so that all men should bow before it likewise, so do I worship you. Nay, you need not grudge me that poor favour, girl; it can harm you not, and I worship nothing else—not I, i'faith. I am like Guy in that—I love not chapel-going. While the priest is droning, droning, my fingers itch to strangle his fair throat; all chanting-time, I sing my maddest songs; and when they kneel, I plant my face in the soft cushions, and make mocking mouths. Do not look so, Mildred; I can bear the pity of your eyes, but not the terror. It was for fear of this that I did not tell you all long, long ago, and only hinted at the horrid thing this morning. You believe me *now*, girl; that is well. I feared that I should have to laugh out loud; then nobody could doubt.

“I was not born a mad child. There was no band about my forehead, tight and hard as now, when I was very young; but gradually the thing stole on me, day by day, or rather night by night, as I should reckon, for it is at night, like a baleful flower, that madness grows. Ah! what nights I passed! Alone in the large bed-chamber above the hall I used to lie—a ghastly nursery, Mildred, for a child like me. The woman that was nurse, instead of tales of fairies and magicians, told me of Guy and of that dread shape—the statue yonder—which I had seen a thousand times before I beheld it here. Every night she promised to sit beside me to keep off the dreadful things, and every night she would put the candle to my face, and seeing me, as she thought, asleep, would leave me in the dark: then came the whispering voices, the soft rustling sounds, the stealthy footsteps round my little bed. Ah! what misery, Mildred, from the time of closing doors and loud good-nights, when my father and the rest retired, until the blessed morning dawn! Above my room was one which no one occupied, as it was thought; but I knew better. All night, one gibbered and moaned there, warming himself in the moonbeams as best he could, and shaking his chain for company. Once in the daytime I ventured thither, and though he

was not there, I saw his chain fastened to the wall by a strong staple, as madmen always are by their sane brethren. This made me very cunning from the first. Only my father knew, and what he knew I think he has now forgotten. On a day when I thought myself unwatched, I had climbed up the winding stair of the West Tower—a weary way for my young limbs to go—and peering above the battlement, was about to execute a plan, long and fondly cherished, of leaping off into the air, when a strong arm was suddenly put round my waist, and I heard my father's voice. He was not angry, as I feared he might be; he spoke me fair and very kindly, and carried me down stairs to save my little limbs; and while he did so, upon my face I felt his burning tears fall fast, which frightened me, not knowing why he wept. But I know now——”

“Alas! poor child,” murmured Mildred, tenderly. “My heart bleeds for thee, Rupert.”

“She pities me, and does not fear!” he cried. “There is hope yet, then. The red-hot pain already hurts less keenly. I thank thee, blessed balm. Mildred, I have told you that the night is terrible to such as I am; but the morn is very sweet. My comfort comes with the first grey light that steals into my chamber, at which the phantoms vanish, and the mocking faces cease their gibes. A bird that loves the tree beneath my window, presently begins to sing—a rain of melody upon my parched-up soul. Then at the open window do I sit for hours, quite happy. The morning winds are ever blithe and joyous; out from the purple light they come that crowns this very hill. The pine-groves beckon them towards me; the cornfield, with ten thousand tossing ears, motions them on; and on they drive in music, and shed by my hair, and calm my throbbing pulse, and cool my fevered brain. Then mine eyes, looking on the dewy fields, themselves have dew in them—a something loosens at my heart, and then the dew—the sleeping farms, the river's stately flow, the wonder and the glory of the earth, sink deep into my soul.”

"It cannot be," said Mildred, scarce knowing that she spoke aloud, "that such a mind as this has suffered total wreck."

"Ay, but it hath, it hath," returned he, earnestly. "I have only told you what I suffered as a boy—enough, as I see, for conviction, and yet not too much, as I hope for loving pity. Let it suffice to say, that with every year the evil spirit has grown within me, and must one day gain the mastery altogether, if *you* will not cast it out. There is but one physician in all this world with power to heal me, Mildred. 'Tis you who are even as the morning dawn to me; and if you will but smile a little on me, the darkness will presently dissolve, and all will yet be day. I feel, I *know* it. See, I kneel before you, and entreat you—brave, kind heart—to give me your true love! Men often boast such love is life to them; but to me, more than life; and if refused, a thing more bitter far than death awaits me."

He knelt before her on the silver sand, his fair face gentle and sad as the dewy eve, his thin white hands clasped as close as anchorite's, his eyes fixed hungrily on hers. What *could* she tell him—for the truth she dared not tell—what answer could she give that neither would deceive him with false hopes, nor smite him where a blow would worse than slay?

"Rupert," said she, "you say that I am fair, and therein, as I believe, you tell me truth. A woman loves her loveliness very dearly; and yet I swear to you that I would straightway become misshapen and uncomely as yonder seeming statue, if by so doing I could lift the burden which you speak of from your troubled mind, or help the grievous loss which time and loving hearts may still, through God's sweet mercy, remedy. You are yet very young. At present, be content with my best sympathy: having confided to me this great grief, let me bear something of it; make me your priest, and I will do my best to shrive you, keeping your secret safe. Beware of evil counsels, and all evil: the Clyffards are not born mad more than other folks, but unbridled vice and wickedness made them what they are. Be good,

be temperate, be honest—for by such means it is that men keep sane.”

“And that is all the comfort you can give me now,” said Rupert, sighing and rising from his seat. “God bless you, Mildred, for that much. Let us go home. I am far better for this talk: your very voice, though speaking not the words which I would hear, is soothing as the harp which David played to pacify mad Saul.”

As they moved slowly homeward, and before the glimmer of their torches had quite left the vaulted chamber, Raymond emerged dripping from the subterranean stream.

“What could Rupert have had to tell her,” murmured he, “that he should follow her to Ribble Cave, and keep me dripping in the dark so long? A man less accustomed to otter-hunting and fishing in mid-stream, would have run the risk of—taking cold.”

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SCENE THROUGH THE SKY-LIGHT.

THERE are some men, whom one cannot help envying, that will as readily execute a painful duty as confer a benefit or a pleasure ; who feel no embarrassment whatever at having to say a disagreeable thing, and whose facility for managing unpleasant matters with a high hand should commend itself (and yet somehow fails to do so) to public admiration. There are others, again, who shrink from giving pain to their fellow-creatures, as from a surgical operation on themselves, not necessarily from high, or even benevolent motives, but because their natures are sensitive, delicate, and selfish—who are moral Epicureans. Although Ralph Clyffard was a good man (as good men went in those days), he was one of these. He had a kind heart, and would have wounded nobody's feelings, if he could have helped it ; but if somebody must needs be offered the cold shoulder, it was not likely to be that person upon whom his own happiness and comfort principally depended ; it was likely to be that person least of all. Expediency and convenience, as well as doting fondness, all combined together to make his wife's will a law unto him, and to cause him to look coldly upon whomsoever she had cast out from her good graces. But, at the same time, he would never knowingly have committed an injustice to please her ; and it was very painful to him even to do what was

harsh. Thus, when he invited his second son to sup with him in his own turret-chamber, with the object of telling him that he was not wanted at home, the Master of Clyffe did not look forward to a pleasant evening. His conscience pricked him, and the milk of human kindness flowed forth from the wound towards poor Raymond. Throughout the interview, he was patient in listening to what the young man had to say for himself; and even when that defence took something of the form of accusation of Mrs. Clyffard herself, he suffered him to say on.

"I do not deny, son Raymond," rejoined the old man, pacing the little chamber to and fro with his hands behind him, "that you have something to complain of. Your step-mother has, I fear, been somewhat imperious; while you, Ray, on the other hand, are not of a conciliatory disposition. There are troubles enough threatening this house without the continuance of this unnatural dissension—I cannot bear it. I have come to the conclusion that, for the present at least, it would be better that you should absent yourself: travel is an excellent thing for a young man of your age; spend, therefore, the next few months or a year abroad. When you were quite a lad, you used to be very ambitious of military honours—what say you to a commission in His Majesty's Foot Guards? Money, my dear Ray, you may be sure, will never be a subject upon which we shall disagree. At my death, you will at once succeed to your mother's little portion, and thrice as much again. I have not forgotten you in my will, Ray; and in the meantime—I wish you to want for nothing—here are notes to a considerable amount——"

"What! father; am I to leave Clyffe at once? Even a servant is not thus turned out of doors without warning!"

"Nay, lad, I meant not that: a week hence, nay, a month, if you will have it so; there shall be no haste, no harshness. There are arrangements to be made, of course, friends to be written to, interest to be made."

Raymond looked at his father with a sad and pitying smile; he was not angry, though deeply grieved; he well knew that the old man was mentally contending, not with *him*, but with another not then present.

Ralph mistook his glance. "Is the money not enough, good lad? Then let me double it. Heaven knows, I have grudged thee nothing."

"Nothing but your love, father," returned the young man reproachfully; "and now you have it not to give me. I trust that she who has won it all away from me, may not requite you ill for so much good-fortune."

"Raymond, you do me wrong; I love you, boy; how should I not have love for my own son?"

"Ay, how should you not?" returned the young man bitterly. "The babe you danced upon your knee so often—your black birdie? The child you took before you upon your pommel for many a breezy ride? The boy whose light-hearted laugh, you said, was the only music you cared to listen to? How should you not, indeed? And yet you have forgotten all these things?"

"No, Ray, no—I have not forgotten them," answered the old man hurriedly, patting the stripling's head with his great hand. "You are still very dear to me; you are indeed. Dear Ray!—dear Ray! Never weep, lad; that is not like a Clyffard."

"Who has seen me weep, save you?" returned the young man passionately. "But I have a heart, which some have not, believe me, who can weep when they please."

Ralph Clyffard knit his brows. "Hush!" said he; "that is Mildred playing the organ in the gallery, is it not? How grandly it swells forth into the summer night; something divine seems gathering in my soul, yet not without pain." He placed his hand upon his heart, and sighed, then listened in silence, with his eyes turned to the unshuttered window and the darkling sky.

"Father, since I am to leave you," continued Raymond earnestly, "I trust that you will listen to a few

last words, which may be the very last that will ever pass between us."

"They may be indeed," returned the old man, still gazing on the night. "The time is drawing near when I shall be but a memory to you, Raymond; then think upon me as tenderly as you can."

"Say not so, father; you are yet strong and hale; I trust there are many happy years——"

"Happy!" interrupted the Master of Clyffe with quiet scorn: "how should a Clyffard, having a son, be happy? I speak not of you, Ray: your light and wayward nature may be somewhat out of tune with mine, and may vex and anger others; but there is nothing in *you* to cause the current of a father's blood to freeze."

"Nor in Rupert either," answered the young man resolutely, while the organ pealed and thundered; "although it may be some one's interest to make his father think so. What I would say to you, father, has reference to this very matter, and are words of warning, not of hate, upon mine honour."

"Being thus pressed, I cannot refuse thee, Raymond; yet remember that it is the last draught which leaves its flavour on the palate, and men who would be praised for their good wine, offer not their friends its lees at parting. My heart is towards you, Raymond; it is indeed. I pray you turn it not away just as we are about to separate."

"That must be light love, father, which is so lightly lost," returned the young man sorrowfully; "and though I prize it—being all that I may claim, it seems—yet will I risk its forfeiture. If I tell you lies I will give you leave to hate me; nay, if I do not prove that I speak truth, then you shall hate me still."

"Prove what, Raymond?" asked the old man with kindling eyes. "Trust me, having said so much, though it grows near to midnight, and I need my rest, you shall say all."

Above his hoarse deep tones the organ, "yearning like a god in pain," was heard tumultuous.

"I will prove then, father, that the sad story of our

race, and of its curse, has been made the handle of deceit and fraud; that the vision which you have seen so often is no illusion indeed, but worse, the cruel kick of a guileful woman; that the Fair Lady of Clyffe"—(*Achieved is the Glorious Work* here broke forth jubilant and full, and stormed about their ears in wild acclaim)—"that the haunter of our house is flesh and blood; nay, is the woman whom you have made your wife, to dupe and fool you—— Strike, father, if you will, but listen. Nay, then, do but use your eyes!" Raymond opened a little door in the Turret-chamber, which gave upon the castle leads, and flung it wide. "Follow me," cried he; "and cast me down upon the stones of yonder courtyard if I do not prove my words!"

With hasty and uneven steps, his hair streaming in the autumn wind, his bronzed face pale with rage, and in expectation of he knew not what, the Master of Clyffe followed close upon his younger son. The moon was small and hidden at times by the flying clouds; but there was light enough from it and from the stars to show the vast expanse of roofing, diverse in form as any frozen sea—here level, there ridged; here rising four-square, there shooting into pinnacles and gables. The various periods of the stately place were pictured there to the antiquarian eye in horizontal section; not a ray from within was to be seen save in one spot, to which they were rapidly drawing near; this shone through a sequestered sky-light, set in the right angle, formed by the junction of two towers. Three hideous gargoyles leaned from their stone bases, as though to peep down at the scene below, and grinned approval.

"One moment, father," cried Raymond, laying his hand upon his arm. "I have staked all on this, and must go through with it; but it is for your sake I have done it, as much, ay, more than for my own. You have a right to look there; but though she were Jezebel herself, I would not play the spy without her husband's leave. That is Mrs. Clyffard's private chamber, Sir."

"She is not up," returned the old man hoarsely; "she

bade me 'good-night' ere you joined me at the supper-table."

"She *is* up, father: that is her light, burning as bright and purely as though it were an altar-candle in the chapel yonder. She is dressing for her part to-night. Look! look!"

For an instant the Master of Clyffe leaned heavily upon the shoulder of his son; then with a great effort he strode forward rapidly, but firmly, and gazed down through the sky-light upon what was passing in the room beneath. For a few moments there he stood, unmoving, with eyes that devoured the scene; then over his face a shadow fell, as falls on him who at the grave's mouth looks his very last upon the wife he loves; and uttering one great cry of anguish, he pressed his hand against his broken heart, and fell backward.

Raymond sprang toward him, and, as he did so, could not but see that which had so moved his father. In a small room, windowless save for the sky-light which had betrayed her, stood Mrs. Clyffard, with her eyes cast upward in terror and dismay; they had met her husband's downward gaze at the very moment when she, in the quaint black robe in which she was wont to play her guileful part, and with her black hair loose, and fallen to her waist, was practising her rôle before the tire-glass. The shroud was in one hand, and needle and thread in the other, while her face wore a look of triumphant malice, which would have unmasked the foul fiend himself, though clad in angelic garments. One instant, she stared upward as though spell-bound, and then quenched the light.

Mrs. Clyffard had not seen her husband fall; but there were some precious minutes before her yet, she knew. Swiftly she entered the next chamber, which was her own, and seizing a large jewel-case from the dressing-table, emptied its glittering contents into her pocket; from a small locked drawer in the same table she took a leathern purse, filled tightly with bank-notes. "I did not dream when I began this hoard," she muttered, "that the day whereon to use it was so near, or

it would have been thrice as large." Had the day really come? Was the game quite lost? She paused upon the threshold of her chamber, and worried her own fair lips with her sharp teeth. Yes; utterly lost. The expression of her husband's face had been unmistakable—faith shattered, love misplaced, unutterable pain and shame, had been all pictured there. He had been undeceived with a vengeance. That other form, too, she had seen was Raymond's—her sworn enemy; it was to him, doubtless, that she was indebted for this evil turn. She had been baffled, beaten by that hateful boy. That was the bitterest draught in all the cup. How came he wandering on the leads at midnight in that fashion? So doubtless, however, it had happened, and seeing what he saw, he had brought his father to look likewise. Curse the cunning boy! And yet, was she not herself to blame, running the risk she did, however small, of such unmitigable ruin. Why had she not put up a blind? Why have used a light at all? Could Mildred have betrayed her? Her fair face blackened at the thought. No, she dared not have done it. Her trembling fingers, had she been privy to the scheme, could never have beaten out those organ thunders, which even now were swelling through the house. She was still playing, and therefore her aunt could not make exit, as she had meant to do, through the great gallery. She opened another door, and went out thence. She did not wish to meet a human being; she would leave Clyffe and all it held, and begin life again elsewhere. She was fair as ever, and not poor, as she had been at first—but alas! here was Rupert coming, and at speed, in the narrow passage; there could be no avoidance of him. "Make haste!" cried he—"quick—quick!" He spoke impatiently, and seemed scarce to know to whom he was speaking; or perhaps he already knew all, and addressed her thus imperiously, as one upon whom courtesy and all fair-dealing would be thrown away. "Quick, I say; my father is ill—is dying; bring a—a—" Running towards her in hot haste, calling thus, both speech and motion seemed to fail him

all upon a sudden ; with mouth agape with terror, and eyes starting from their sockets, he stood dumb, then, shrinking from before her with fear and loathing as from some terrible and unclean thing, he turned and fled.

For a moment, ' Grace Clyffard watched him with irresolute eyes. "I forgot my strange attire," she murmured ; " the fool takes me for the fair lady ; he thinks I am the harbinger of death. How were it if I really be so ? ' My father is dying,' said he. Perhaps his heart has killed him, as he always thought it would. If so, all may yet be well. My word is as good as Raymond's. Who will believe an idle tale like this, vouched for but by a dead man and a boy ? I will put by this masquerading gear, and play my own part of a tender wife once more. If I have the smoothing of Ralph Clyffard's pillow, another dawn shall never trouble his vexed soul again."

Hastily she put away her black garment in a safe and secret place, and attired herself in the dress she had worn that evening ; then, stepping forth into the now vacant gallery, took the way that led to the chamber where her husband had supped, and whence the sound of many voices and the tramp of many feet could now be heard.

CHAPTER XV.

OVER THE BODY.

IN the same room where father and son had talked together of parting but a few minutes back, Ralph Clyffard lay upon a little couch, with Raymond kneeling by his side. Another sort of parting than that of which they had spoken was taking place, and the stiffening fingers could not even return the lad's mute pressure in token of farewell. The mighty chest of the Master of Clyffe still rose and fell, but in uneven spasms, as though his gloomy soul was struggling to flit away. Around stood many a serving man and maid, summoned by that mysterious messenger misfortune, that flies so swift and far, and to whom the night is as the day. Scarce one of them had ever before ventured to intrude upon his privacy, but now they watched him with reverence, but without fear, setting forth upon that journey which rich and poor must alike make. One groom had already been despatched for a doctor, another for a priest; but somehow it was known to all that their lord would never open his proud eyes again. They had been kind eyes, for all their pride—the voice, now hushed for ever, had been a gracious one to all his household. Some honest tears were falling. There had never, at least, been so good a Clyffard as this last.

"Where is my brother Rupert?" asked Raymond huskily.

"I told him what had happened, Sir," returned a

domestic respectfully ; " and he threw on his dressing-gown, and started hither as soon as I. He took the passage by my lady's room, meaning to call her by the way—— But here is my lady, Sir."

Mrs. Clyffard entered very swiftly, with her dress only half fastened, and her hair dishevelled, like one suddenly aroused in her preparations for retiring to bed. "What is the matter ?" cried she.

No one answered, but all made way for her ; and it was strange to see how all became conscious at once of their relative positions, now that the mistress had arrived. Some even left the room, awakened to the consciousness of having no business there, and fearing sharp rebuke. Quite a great space was left between the half-circle of curious domestics and the couch where the young man was still kneeling by his father's side. Had Raymond spoken against her yet, or had her husband had voice to speak ? Had the servants withdrawn thus suddenly at her approach from loathing or from respect ?

"What has happened to my own dear husband ?" murmured she, falling upon her knees beside his pillow.

"Murder !" returned Raymond, under his breath.

She did not hear him so much as see the movement of his lips, but even without that his stern reproachful eyes would have given her the like answer.

"My poor, poor Ralph !" exclaimed the widow—for death was already setting that blank, which is its signature to our release from all worldly cares, upon the slowly-stiffening face—"and am I only here in time to close thine eyes ?"

"Touch him not !" hissed Raymond fiercely. "Have you not heard that, when a murdered man is touched by the vile hand that slew him, the blood will flow afresh from his drained wounds ? Beware, I say ! Lay but a finger on his sacred brow, which you have helped to wrinkle, and I will take you by the throat, and proclaim your crime !"

He had not, then, at present proclaimed it ; the

precious time this fool had wasted were golden moments to her indeed. An accusation thus delayed was already robbed of half its danger. Why had Raymond spared her ?

"For my father's sake," said the young man, answering through his set teeth her unspoken question, "I have spared you hitherto ; not because I love you—you fair devil !—but that I would not the world should know how this great and noble heart was fooled.—Where is Rupert, woman ?"

For the first time in her life, Grace Clyffard quailed and shuddered ; the concentrated passion with which the young man spoke was terrible to listen to. She was armed at all points to meet hate and guile with their own weapons, but not the physical fury which was revealed in the tones of her step-son. She knew that she stood in danger of that awful something whose shadow was on Rupert Clyffard's face—that if she dared to insult that forehead—already losing its pained look, and growing calm and cold, with her false lips, Raymond would surely rise, and perhaps strangle her. She did not mind what things they might say against her—her chief peril in that respect was past—but she feared his powerful fingers. Once round her throat, they might not part with it again ; it may be that she judged him by herself in that ; but certainly dark Raymond had a look she well might fear. She had once seen Cyril at the Dene look at her brother Gideon much like that, just ere he strove to tear him limb from limb. She had no leaded weapon, as Gideon had, to beat such an assailant back.

"Away, away, fiend !" muttered her step-son furiously ; "your presence is pollution—your work is done here. That poor abused fond ear can drink in lies no more. Away, I say !"

Mrs. Clyffard arose from her knees with as little haste as she dared to use. As she did so, a female servant touched her on the shoulder ; "Mr. Rupert is taken very ill, Madam. Miss Mildred is with him, and has help, but she bid me tell you as soon as possible. She was

coming hither herself, and came upon him lying upon the floor of the passage close by his own door, in a fit or something."

"Do you hear this new misfortune, Raymond?" sobbed Mrs. Clyffard.

"Ay, go you to my brother," returned the young man sternly.

And as she moved away with anguished but tearless eyes, and firm, swift tread, the bystanders murmured to one another, "How wise and strong she is in all this trouble! How dutifully she leaves the beloved dead, for whom she can do no more, to tend the son who was so dear to him!"

"In a fit or something," soliloquised the Lady of Clyffe, as she hurried to Rupert's room. "Heaven forefend that I should have frightened the fool to death! My tenure of Clyffe is valueless indeed if it has to be shared by that dark boy yonder; yet even in such a case, I will be revenged upon him. He has missed his turn; but when *my* turn comes round, look to yourself, Raymond Clyffard! No man shall make me pale as you have done, and live to boast of it. I would that Gideon were here, or Cator, or even the poor coward Clement. This Mildred is scarce safe; she serves me, but it is with grudging. If Rupert lives this bout, he must be married to her, mad or sane. If she denies him—let her, too, look to herself. I have not gone so far to turn back now; and though I be alone, I am yet a match for all of them!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EXTORTED PROMISE.

RUPERT CLYFFARD was very ill, and near to death ; but for his step-mother's cunning hand, which bled him ere the leech could reach the castle, Raymond would surely have been heir of Clyffe ; while afterwards the sick man would have sunk had it not been for her niece. Long weeks elapsed before his head could leave the pillow, where it lay calm and patient, while Mildred was in his chamber, and restless, with roving eyes, when she was absent. Her voice revived his failing strength like wine ; her hand upon his brow was as the magnetic charm which beckons away all pain, and as the precious drug which dowers the dullest with delicious dreams. It pleased her well to be of service to him ; she gave up rest, and exercise, and pleasure beyond words to tell (for might not Raymond now have borne her company all day ?), with cheerful readiness. She was glad at heart that she had such opportunities of proving her good-will towards him ; she tended him like his own sister ; and since she was not his sister, the Lady of Clyffe approved and smiled upon her. Such gentle ministering must, in her aunt's opinion, have, as her own had had, some selfish end ; and what end could this be, save one alone ? She never called her "child" now ; it was "Mildred, love," or at least "my pretty Mildred," whenever she addressed her niece in Rupert's hearing, as though she would have sug-

gested to his mind the very words which he himself should use.

So helpless and enfeebled was poor Rupert at first, that the young girl thought of nothing but his weakness, and how she might conduce to his recovery. But when the colour came back to his cheeks, and some vigour to his limbs, and he could sit up and talk to her, Mildred almost regretted her past kindness. He was grateful to her, of course, but with his expressions of gratitude was mingled something warmer, which she could not affect not to understand, and yet which in Mrs. Clyffard's presence she dared not utterly reject. Though her aunt felt satisfaction at present with her conduct, the girl well knew that only so much the greater would be her hate and fury when she came to learn the truth. Nor was Mildred to blame for this dissimulation. It was not a matter with which "moral courage" had anything to do. To have confessed, "I cannot wed Rupert, since I have pledged my faith to Raymond," would have been to produce a catastrophe such as she dared not even picture to herself, since its consequences would certainly have extended to her lover. She feared, with reason, for his very life; and so the poor girl temporised, only too well aware of the passion with which Rupert was consumed; yet trusting that the flame would never gain such head but that her "no" at last might quench it, or at all events procrastinate, as before, the evil day. The young man's illness, while it weakened his physical strength, seemed to have healed his mental malady. There was nothing now to inspire her with apprehension in his look *beside* its love, and if returning reason had been indeed vouchsafed him, surely, with his natural generosity to second it, he would withdraw—when her dread hour of confession came—from his unwelcome suit. Something like this she framed to comfort herself with; but it scarcely fulfilled its office. She could not always forget how insecure was the foundation of this hopeful faith; for not only might Rupert's seeming calmness be untrustworthy, even as matters were, but a revelation was at present withheld from him, which was

likely to try it sorely. He had not as yet been told of his father's death. When given to understand that he was ill, he had received the information with quiet sorrow but without surprise. "I know it," said he calmly, evidently with reference to the immediate cause of his own ailment, all allusion to which was of course avoided. He meant to say that he had seen the herald of calamity in the Fair Lady of Clyffe, and was prepared for domestic misfortune. Still, it was strange that he never asked after his father—laid long since by the side of the Clyffards, mad and sane, in the chapel vault—nor remarked upon the sable suits of all around him. This was not, however, because he had not observed them. One morning, Mrs. Clyffard, doubtless by design, having left the room, and the sick man and Mildred being alone together, he addressed her thus. It was the first day he was well enough to leave his bed, and that only for a sofa. "How soon, think you, after a man has died, may his son marry, Mildred?"

She was in the act of handing him a cup of broth, and her tremulous fingers almost refused their office, as she listened to his words.

"How soon, Mildred?" said he again.

"That is a question, Rupert, which I cannot answer. It depends upon the love that the son bore his father."

"I am thinking of one who would have loved his father well, if there had been room within his heart; but there was no room. There was space for nothing there but love for the girl who was to be his wife.—You tremble, dearest. Pretty fluttering dove. How soon, how soon, sweet heart?" His languid eyes looked on her earnestly, but without a trace of doubt, as one who in an orchard watches for the ripe fruit to fall between his palms while another shakes the tree. "What sweet revenge you have taken on yourself, for your pretence of cruel hardness, in this long kind tendance; to be my nurse before you are my bride—that is rare indeed. I will not think that pain itself could shadow that fair brow, or shrink that dimpled cheek; but if it ever doth, my Mildred, I will wait upon you,

day and night, counting all toil as pleasure, all weariness as blissful rest ; and while you have strength to smile, be overpaid indeed. Smile on me now, and seat you by my side ; for as some eastern king delights in hearing his own greatness proclaimed to his own ear, so yearn I, Mildred, to hear you say, 'I love you,' although none knows you do so well as I." His nerveless hand closed on one glossy curl, and carried it to his lips : while, lapped no less in the sweet assurance of reciprocated love than in the calm content that comes to the recovering frame long racked by sickness, he waited for her answer.

"Rupert," said she, "I thought that the last time we spoke of—the last time, that is, this subject was touched upon by you, we agreed to wait a while before it was resumed. When I then said, 'You are still very young, Rupert,' I did not mean too young by weeks or even months, but years."

"Am I so young, dear girl?" said he, with a tender smile. "I thank Heaven for it. There will be then more time in which to show my love to you. How happy shall we be together, and how long! Youth is sweet—ah me, how sweet it is ;—and after youth there is the prime ; and then beyond the prime is that which I have read is best of all—the calm content of tried and faithful love ; two hearts bound up in one, with joys, regrets, and memories in common. My bud, my full-bloomed flower—my rose, whose faded leaves (if you *can* fade) shall be odorous and precious to the end, ah, how I love you !"

Mildred's heart sank within her. If she had been his wedded wife already, the young man could scarcely have uttered these words with a more settled faith.

"Why speak of this, which we were not to speak of, Rupert?"

"Because, sweet, there is no longer any reason for keeping silence. I am the Master of Clyffe now, and there is none to say me 'nay,' when I say 'yea.' Moreover, I have learned that my good father gave his consent in private to our union, so the very dead will smile

upon our nuptials ; while your Aunt Grace—— Nay, then, I will not mention her, since you dislike her, but she has been a trustworthy friend to me, Mildred. When the light of love was low within my cheerless heart, she fanned its embers with encouragement ; not that she knew why they were so faint and pale ; not that she guessed the secret—ah, *you* have not forgotten it, I see. I hoped you had, Mildred. There is no need to remember it any more. By you, fair saint, that demon has been exorcised, I hope.”

His voice, so confident hitherto, though low and weak, here wavered and broke off. His hand, which he would have carried to his forehead, failed by the way, and sank down, as it happened, upon hers ; then straightway as though revived, Antæus-like, by that sweet contact, he spoke again. “She bade me woo you, since I loved you so—that surely was no evil counsel, Mildred ? and when I found you cold, she bade me press my suit—did she not do well ? ’Twas she that sent you to me on that morning to her private chamber——”

“I knew it,” interrupted the girl gravely ; “and sent you, too, to Ribble Cave to spy upon your brother.”

“Mildred !”

“Ay, Rupert : she came between Raymond and his own father, and now she would come between Raymond and you. She is the go-between of hate, and not of love ; her offices are evil and not good. The tender mercies of the wicked, Rue, are cruel.”

“She is not cruel to me Mildred, but kind,” returned the young man ; and strange it is that, though she stands not in your favour, it is for your sake only that she stands in mine. For *her* I have no more liking than the sailor hath for the biting north wind, whose favouring gale is bearing him to the wished-for haven. She would wreck me, if it suited her purpose, I doubt not ; but since her interest and my happiness are fellow-passengers——”

“Be not so sure of that, Rupert Clyffard,” broke in Mildred earnestly. “Beware lest there is no pleasant shore awaiting you, no isles of Paradise—beware rather

lest she is driving you on the rocks. If she has represented what poor tendance I have paid you in this sickness in any other light than that of sisterly affection and good-will—if she has dared, whether by hint, or by out-spoken word, to plight my troth to yours, to proxy-wed me, then has she deceived both me and you—nay, more, if she has ever told you that I love you, she has *lied!*” Her tone, which had been vehement and almost fierce, here melted into pity, as she added, “Rupert, I love you not!”

Stupefied amazement, wretchedness, despair, took each the other’s place on Rupert’s features as the girl went on; when she had finished, he lay with his white face blank, as though life and passion had left it together. Seriously alarmed, Mildred seized his cold hand, and strove to warm it in her palms; the charm of her touch still worked; the life-blood which had ebbed from his very lips, flowed slowly back; and in the rayless eyes a fierce and lurid light began to kindle. Twice his parched tongue essayed to utter something, but she could not catch its meaning; the third time he spoke plain. “Send me the traitress hither. Let her take your place, and lean above me with her lying smile. I want to whisper something in her ear. Send me that woman hither.”

“Hush, hush! I hear her coming, Rue; be calm.”

“Calm! with those words of doom still ringing in my ears? Calm—ay; as the tropic sea is calm, beneath whose waveless face the shark awaits the swimmer. Give her your chair, Mildred—you who love me not.”

“You will not tell her, Rupert; that would be base indeed.”

“Tell her—ay; just one whisper in her ear. Then, afterwards, you may tell her what you like. I have got some news for her to take to Pluto.”

“Dear Rupert, for my sake, do her no harm,” pleaded Mildred in an agony of terror. “When I said I loved you not, I meant, not *yet!*”

Revenge and cunning, which had held divided sway in

the sick man's face, here abdicated together ; hope for one moment sat there like a sun, and then was succeeded by suspicion."

"I do not believe you, Mildred Leigh," answered he fiercely ; "nor will, unless you swear it !"

"Swear it ?" echoed Mrs. Clyffard, entering the room. "Heyday, but I must look to this ! My Mildred put upon her oath ! When *I* was young, it was the man who swore, whereby, if troth was broken, *he* was perjured, but the lady was held blameless. There is no such courtesy in these days. Shame upon you, Rue !"

She stood beside the two, with one small hand on either's shoulder.

"It is not I who am to blame," said Rupert hoarsely. "Fair mother, will you not sit ?"

"Nay," returned Mildred hastily ; "you have not taken your broth yet. Let me tend you a little longer ; Mrs. Clyffard has been your nurse all day."

"So, so," said the Lady of Clyffe with a silver laugh ; "this is pushing us from our stools indeed ! You tell me frankly what I am to expect, when Clyffe shall change its mistress. It was not troth that you were plighting, then ? The question was 'How soon ?' Am I not right, dear Rupert ?"

"Ay, I asked her that."

"And what was the reply ?" quoth Mrs. Clyffard, pressing her hand with meaning against Mildred's shuddering flesh. "A month ? I guessed it was a month. Come ; since my modest Mildred will not answer you, I will answer for her. In a month, she shall be yours, Rupert."

"I must hear it from her own lips, good mother ; you prophesy too smoothly."

"Mrs. Clyffard's fair face darkened ; matters were not, then, as they had seemed. Mildred had refused him, or procrastinated at least. The young girl's face was buried in her hands, but not to hide its blushes ; it was as pale as marble.

Grace Clyffard's soft voice hardened ; it was music

still, but clear, incisive, as the clash of cymbals. "I do not pretend to be a prophet, Rupert; you wrong me there; but what I *promise*—that will come to pass. My niece shall be your wife; and as for her scruples about time, that is a maiden's way."

"From her own lips, I say," repeated Rupert hoarsely.

"Swear then, niece Mildred—I pray you, find your voice—to wed the Clyffard within thirty days."

Never was deadly menace clothed so fair; never did spoken words convey more cruel meaning than was shot from those azure eyes.

Fear for Raymond's safety, threatened, as it seemed to her, in every tone of her aunt's voice; fear on her own account, which always overwhelmed her when brought face to face with Mrs. Clyffard; pity for Rupert, and terror as to what violence he might commit upon the instant, if she should answer "No"—for she had read murder in his eyes a while ago—overcame the resolution which had hitherto supported Mildred. Keeping her face still covered, and murmuring a "God forgive me" to herself, she answered solemnly, "I swear."

"Swear what?" asked Mrs. Clyffard pitilessly.

"I swear to marry your step-son within thirty days."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CLOUD IN THE SUNSHINE.

Two years have passed since the events recorded in the last chapter. Our scene is no longer laid at Clyffe Hall, but far away in the south country; while the dwelling which is occupied by our *dramatis personæ* is very unpretending. A little low-roofed cottage, set in a garden glowing with spring flowers, such as only flourish so early in a genial climate. The two French windows open on a tiny lawn, smooth as a boy's cheek, and in the centre rises a tall clump of Pampas grass, watered by a shapely nymph of marble from a marble pitcher; the lawn is girt by a broad purple belt of fuchsia, beyond which lies the garden, not for show alone, but rich in vegetables and savoury herbs; while around all this fairy demesne there runs a waving wall of odorous tamarisk. A waving wall, I say, for though the cottage is nestled in the hollow of a chalk-hill, and the boisterous winds from north and east, which roar and revel on the downs above, can never reach it, it lies open to the south and west winds, whose soothing song scarce ceases the summer through. With them the swallow comes to nestle neath the eaves, with them the bee (whom on the tiny heights their violence will not permit to ply his thievish trade) to rob the flowers; but on a ledge of chalk, full in the noonday sun, stand three stout hives, for which the rent is paid in glittering comb, so that the winged thief is rifled in his turn—a few frail trees, warped by the windy years to grow

aslant, keep off the westering sun; but all the south is open. To those who sit within the cottage, the sloping garden, and the sloping down beyond, are seen, and then the sea; but to one who from the window withdraws a pace or two, or lies upon his bed up stairs, the eye looks straight down on the boundless blue of ocean. Ah, precious boon in sickness, to watch the shifting shadows of the clouds, the swirling eddies, the daily battles of the wind and tide; to mark the sea-gulls wheel or blown about by the fierce gusts; to see the glorious company of white-robed ships, which this or that fair wind has just set free, pass by upon their distant errands, or to gaze upon the more homely toil which, in the little bay, the fishermen are plying; to contemplate the great waters, and those who make their business thereon. Then at night, how the sharp pain is dulled by the sea's monotonous undertone, that lullaby of everlasting rest, or overwhelmed and deadened by the majestic music of the storm!

But there is no sickness in this cottage now; the tall man sitting in the little balcony above the doorway, whose uncovered head almost touches the green roofing, is not bowed by it; nor is the graceful form of his young wife, although a year ago or so she blessed the sea, what time, after her blissful trouble, she lay awake long nights with her sweet babe beside her, sleepless, but in rest unspeakable. The baby-girl, too, clinging to her mother's skirt, is well and blooming. And yet there is a shadow upon the young wife's brow, which even the sunshine of that tiny presence cannot erase, nor the blithe and the ringing tones of her husband's voice.

"What, my pretty one!" quoth he, "a cloud upon thy brow upon our marriage morning. For shame! Come let me kiss it away, love. Not a word of quarrel have we had yet, though we be such old married folks; but I *shall* quarrel, and spoil our claim to the Dunmow flitch, if you do not smile to-day. No, not an April gleam like that, which leaves your heaven the darker, but a July brightness, that must last all day. Come, smile like my own Mildred."

"My dear, dear husband," answered Mildred, tenderly "I know I am very foolish, very wrong. There cannot be, of course—there cannot be any real danger to us." She stooped down to her child, and drew her to her bosom, and held her there, and kissed and rocked her to and fro. "It is so long ago, and she has never tracked us yet; and we have taken no one into our confidence, so that neither by design nor carelessness can we ever be betrayed; and living here so far away from her, and under another name, we cannot but be safe—I have said to myself all this a thousand times; and yet, and yet——"

"Yet *what*, Mildred?"

"Well, nothing; you would only laugh at me. But to-day, of all the days in the year—the day when I would wish to feel no touch of gloom—a something—some presentiment of evil seems to cast its threatening shadow upon my soul. She will never cease to seek us out, Raymond, while life is in her; of that I am right sure. A wolf or a bloodhound could not be more stanch, more persistent for ill. When I think of her, I always think of that fell creature, tardy but sure as fate, which pursues the helpless hare whole days and nights, and at the last—no matter when that is——"

"My dear wife," interrupted Raymond, impatiently, "you are not complimentary to your Aunt Grace at all! The animal you describe is a creature of evil odour called a stoat; moreover, you do not take a high view of my own courage and ability to defend you and little Milly, in calling me a helpless hare. If I be so, and this vermin comes within kicking distance, I know this, she will find me uncommonly strong in the hind-legs."

"Nay, dearest, while you are with us, I rarely have any fear; but when you leave the cottage even for an hour, and now you are going away to-morrow for two whole nights—ah me, that will be terrible!"

"Why, what a coward has my Mildred become, who used to be so brave."

"That was when I had only myself to take care of; but this little one, Raymond—what would my aunt

not give to get her into her power? The baby-heiress of Clyffe! I would that we were what we seem to be here, and she but Milly Hepburn, with nothing to inherit save this little house and ground. We have been happier here than ever we were elsewhere."

"That is very true, love; and I for my part should be well content to pass all my days here. But if poor Rupert dies—or—or worse, I will not sit down and let that woman usurp my rights, far less my child's. No, that I will not. I know, love, why you shudder. You deem that she would poison me and mine, rather than give up an inch of land, or yield one golden piece. But this poisoning is not so easy as one reads of in the story-books. At Clyffe, indeed, she might have worked her wicked will without much hindrance, or perhaps even subsequent peril; but not so *here*. Moreover, she is not above the law. Her unscrupulous fingers cannot clutch what that bids her to deliver up, any more than they can reach us here to harm yourself, your child, or me. I tell you we are safe, Mildred; and if there is a fear on either side, it should be upon Grace Clyffard's. Is she to storm and rave for ever, and we to listen shuddering, because we two have chosen to marry?—Have *I* no cause to curse her in my turn; an alien from my home, and forced to keep in hiding like one escaped from prison? I think that I am doing ill in this, wife. If there were no cowards, be sure there would be no tyrants in the world. The sum my poor father gave me is nigh spent; I need the gold he told me with his own lips was left to me in his will. Why should I not claim my own?"

"Raymond, Raymond," cried the young wife passionately, "for Heaven's sake, be patient. Let us not bring the thunderbolt upon ourselves, even if we are fated not to escape it. Gold is indeed precious in Grace Clyffard's greedy eyes, and power, and the pride of station; but revenge is dearer to her than all. Be sure that on that day when we fled from Clyffe together, upon his very marriage morn, she registered a vow to pay us both."

"I should have thought my lady would have had enough of vows," returned Raymond grimly, "when you

kept that oath she so wickedly extorted, to the letter—married her step-son within thirty days! Sweet perjurer! I can forgive poor Rupert's wrath at having missed his prize so narrowly—since he was but her tool, and never knew how cruelly she urged you—but as for her—— Well, let her grind her dainty teeth. To think that after two long years of absence, the memory of this kite should still flutter my dove, though folded in my very arms! Your cheek is chilly, Mildred; are you cold?"

"Yes, a little cold, dear husband. The wind is rising in the west, as though for tempest. We shall have rough weather to-night."

"'Tis like enough; and if bad weather sets in after this long calm, it will last, I fear. Come, let us have a walk together, while walk we may. Upon one's wedding-day, a ramble arm-in-arm, Darby and Joan-like, is only fitting. Let us pay a visit to the good lieutenant and his wife."

"Ay, and take the dear child with us, to see her god-parents," exclaimed Mildred joyfully.

"You—deceitful—wicked—gipsy," returned her husband, shaking his finger in reproof; "to see her god-parents, indeed! You want to have her with us—that is all. I do believe you never feel your little treasure safe unless beneath our eyes. However, just as you like, love; tell Jane, then, to put her bonnet on."

"I had rather carry Milly myself, Ray—Jane is rather busy—and it's such a very little way to the coast-guard station."

"Another white one! It is three miles, if it is a yard. But then the walk is upon the cliff-top, is it not? a very dangerous pathway in a wind; and Jane is such a giddy girl, and can never be brought to understand that she carries so much more than *her* life's worth in her arms, when she has that precious child."

"Nay, Raymond, dear, I know you love it just as much as I do. How thankful you seemed to be when you were told your child was——"

"Ay, true," interrupted Raymond hastily; "but that

was very foolish of me. If he had chanced to be a boy, what then? He would have had a very different bringing-up from that which has ruined so many a Clyffard. He would have been spared the curse which has fallen upon the eldest-born of us for so many generations."

"And yet how glad you were that it was a girl, Raymond."

"Was I? Well, perhaps I was; at all events, I love our Milly. Come, button-mouth; give papa a kiss; then get you gone, you and your mother too, and wrap yourselves up warm, lest the rain should catch us before we can get home again."

With smiles and kisses, he dismissed them both; then left alone in the verandah, he leant upon the wooden rail that faced the lawn, and drew a letter from his pocket; the address ran thus: Mr. J. HEPBURN, Pampas Cottage, by Westportown. It was written in a cramped and vulgar hand, and in one corner was scrawled "*Immediate*," underlined three times. "How fortunate it was," soliloquised Raymond, "that I chanced to meet the postman in my walk this morning. Otherwise, this letter would have driven my wife wild with terror. She would neither have eaten nor slept till she had compelled me to flee once more from the wrath of this she-devil to some obscure hiding-place, just as we have got reconciled to our little cottage here, and have begun to feel it 'home.' I will burrow no more, but fight it out above ground. The threatened peril is mysterious enough, but the warning puzzles me even more. What a hand my anonymous friend writes; all leaning the wrong way, like those blown-backward saplings yonder. It may be disguised, of course, but at the best I should say it was no gentleman's hand. I am not much of a critic, but the spelling, too, let alone the composition, appears rather faulty.

'Beware, Raymond Clyffard. The cat's eyes have found you out at last; find another hoal for a little; and at once. There is danger lurking at your very door.—A TRUE WELL-WISHER.'

It is certainly very strange, and stranger that it comes when my poor wife has this nameless dread upon her. It can be no hoax, for nobody save those we have most cause to fear could have supplied the materials for it. The post-mark is Westportown only; therefore, the writer cannot be very far off. But except the simple folks whom we are about to visit, what well-wisher have I about here, or indeed anywhere, alas? We are compelled to impose even upon these good people: to lead a life of deception, to exist humbly, furtively! What a fool was I to pass my word to Mildred that it should always be so until Rupert——” He thrust the letter into his bosom as his young wife rejoined him, equipped for walking, and with the child in her arms.

“Well, you *have* been quick,” said he. “What, Milly want a toss before she starts? Give her to me, then, mamma. Nay, now I’ve got her, I shall carry her myself; all strategies are fair in love, as in war; she is my lawful prize.”

It was a fair picture—that stalwart father with the wee bairn cradled in one sheltering arm, and the other thrown around his wife protectingly; and yet there was something in his eyes beside their love: the fire that glows within the eagle’s orbs what time she sees the fowler inch by inch descending from the crag upon her eyrie, axe in hand, to bear away her young.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PREVENTIVE STATION.

THE path which led from Pampas Cottage to the coast-guard station lay westward along the shore, and for a little distance after passing by the fishing hamlet, as Raymond had said, close to the cliff top, but soon descended, not to the beach, but through an intermediate belt of rock and underwood between the cliff and the sea. Here, sheltered from the rising wind, and amid a verdant wilderness of thorn and hazel, it was easy to have imagined it was midsummer. The jackdaws slid in circles from the cliff; the wood-lark hanging in the sheltered air poured forth his love; the linnet whistled to his mate from the warm bush; and flitting from shrub to shrub, the tiny wren twitted his mite of thanks in God's own ear. At times, too, from a broad bank of brier, that, like a frieze, stood out from the white cliff, a hawk would shoot forth, noiseless and swift as light, and poise above the peaceful scene, like Satan watching our blameless Parents in their sleep; then shooting up above the down, would glide and poise again, despite the wind, and yet again would rise for broader view, to fall—a malignant star—and strike his innocent prey in some seeming sheltered homestead.

No homestead is, however, visible to human eye—no sign of the presence of man. The broken rocks, indeed, resemble often human architecture—here a fluted shaft, and there a column with its capital acanthus-wreathed—

but some great throe of Nature has so strewed them there, who in her pangs can fashion things more beautiful than Art can mould in years of patient toil. The sea is sailless, save for one speck of white, which, like a pure soul passing to eternity, goes suddenly out on the horizon's verge.

"Is not this a very paradise, my Mildred?" exclaimed Raymond enthusiastically.

"It is indeed, dear Ray. May Heaven's angels guard us while we tarry in it."

"Amen," answered Raymond gravely. "Not, however," added he more cheerfully, "that I am aware of our needing any special guardian, other than what all mortals need against their spiritual foe. As for mortal enemies, never, surely, was a little household so girt about with defenders as is ours. The smugglers in the village would fight for you as resolutely as ever they fought for an anker of rum; while the good lieutenant and his twenty men here would draw their cutlasses in your defence as gallantly as though you were the Inland Revenue herself. What a snug home they have yonder! Of all the comfortable-looking, ship-shape, spick-and-span residences that men can dwell in, I do think a preventive station is the most enviable."

The path had gradually risen until it brought them in sight of the tenement in question, a long low line of building, with a verandah in front of it, and a large garden, which extended to the sandy shore. They stood now at the look-out station, marked by a mast for signal-flags, and sheltered by a turf-bank from the wind, with the grass worn almost bare upon it in places where the man on duty was wont to lay his telescope—altogether a snug vantage-ground enough, and of course commanding a great expanse of view. The picturesque broken ground over which the three had come, upon one side; and on the other, a white curved bay, with the coast-guard boat high on the shining sand, but ready to be launched at a minute's notice; while in front the sea could be swept for scores of miles. But by far the most noticeable feature of "the Look-out" was certain carved wooden

images stuck up on end, which gave to it the appearance of a spot dedicated to heathen rites. These idols, though representing the softer sex as often as the masculine, were by no means remarkable for personal beauty. Not one had been permitted to retain its entire complement of limbs, and if a lady had managed to preserve the aquilinity of her nose, she might consider herself a fortunate exception. These were figure-heads of vessels which the cruel waves had mutilated, when they cast the ships to which they belonged upon that long low reef to westward stretching far out to sea. Already, with the growing wind, the waters churned and foamed there in white malice; but in that comparative calm it was impossible to picture what wild work they made there during a storm. What hours of human agony had been witnessed by those pitiless cliffs, when, scudding before the gale, the helpless ships came on to their doom among the hissing breakers! What vain resolutions of repentance had they beheld in the white scared faces of whom Death was beckoning—what dumb resolve to meet the worst like men!

From Deadman's Reef, no living man or woman ever yet came to land; nay, the bodies of the drowned which strewn the coast for days after a wreck could scarcely be called human, so bruised and mangled were they by the sharp and jagged rocks; but at very low tide the reef was not without its attractions. Gold had been found there, and was found there still in old-world or alien coins, guineas, moidores, dollars, and doubloons; while it was even said that on a time when a ship from the Indies was there wrecked, the silver sand of Lucky Bay (so called in consequence) had been mingled with sparkling gold-dust, and that the ivory teeth of elephants glistened upon the bare brown beach. The little churchyard, some four miles away, was three parts occupied with the bones thus cast on shore; most of them nameless and unknown, and buried in one mighty grave with a common headstone, *Sacred to the Memory of the Crew of this or that vessel, who perished in a Storm off Deadman's Reef*, and then the date. Nay, sometimes the

very ship was nameless ; her home-port and her destination alike unknown ; and the part of the world she came from only guessed by her scattered and ownerless cargo. And yet, those who perished in her had relatives, and friends, and lovers, like the rest of us, and for long years were watched for, doubtless, and Heaven importuned for them—not altogether, let us hope, in vain.

But it is an ill wind that blows no one any good, and the coast population thereabouts were by no means averse to a south-west gale, and what it brought them. "Death is king, and *vivat* wrecks," was their motto ; and many a cottage in the neighbourhood of Lucky Bay was indebted for its most ambitious piece of furniture to the fury of the winds and waves. Such waifs were reckoned as the gifts of Providence, and accepted by the simple folk with genuine thankfulness, much as a good harvest might be acknowledged by the pious elsewhere. In old times there had been ugly stories afloat of ships having been lured to their destruction by false lights, professing to be safety-beacons ; but whether true or false, such matters belonged to the past only. Above the cliffs which looked down on the reef, there was now a little light-house, which shot a fiery warning far out to sea ; and this was served by a couple of men, who resided by turns with the coast-guard, there being only room for one lodger in this pocket Pharos. Thus, Lucky Bay was dedicated, as it were, to the protection of life as well as property, and seemed, at least to one of the three persons who were now looking down upon it, as the most desirable of human homes.

"How I wish that we lived here, dear Raymond, with those good kind Careys, watched night and day by trusty guardians, instead of in our lonely cottage, where, whenever you are absent, I feel so forlorn and unprotected. See, there is the lieutenant himself, and with a stranger too, as it seems ; at least, I never saw him about the station before."

"Perhaps he is some official visitor, or superintendent ; Carey told me the other day that he was expecting some person of that kind. Look how he is pointing out to

him the vegetable lions ; I think I can hear him telling about those potatoes having been dibbled in by old Jacob, the lantern-keeper, with his own wooden leg ; that's one of the old gentleman's stock stories. Ah, now he sees us. Look how he interrupts his talk, and breaks away from his visitor at once to come and bid you welcome ; we may be sure, therefore, that he is not the inspector."

Certainly, if such he was, Lieutenant Carey paid less respect than is usual in such cases to an official superior, striding away from him with rapid steps to meet the new-comers, and pouring forth, in a rich and powerful voice, a rain of welcomes as he came.

"This is charming of you, Mrs. Hepburn ; this is very friendly to walk so far to our poor home ; and to bring your treasure with you too—my little godchild. Marion, Marion !" (here he raised his voice, as though contending with some fancied strife of the elements) ; "come out, wife ; here are the Hepburns." Then, as he and his visitors approached one another, he went on in what he honestly considered to be confidential tones, but which could be heard in a favourable wind about half a mile.

"I am so delighted to see you, Hepburn ; always delighted, of course, but particularly so to-day. Here's a strange lubber come to stay with me from the *Crown* of Westportown, recommended by the landlord—a man whom one respects, and to whom I am under obligations, but—just as though I kept a tavern like himself. 'My friend, Mr. Stevens,' writes he, 'is exceedingly anxious to see the coast near Lucky Bay, and especially the Mermaid Cavern, during these spring-tides ; and there being no accommodation for himself nearer than this, and much more for his man (who remains here), I have ventured to ask you to give him a shake-down for a night or two.' That's just what the fellow writes, and here is this Mr. Stevens—a lubber, Sir, a lubber—upon my hands. I have not an hour's time to spare, in expectation of this inspection. *You* must show him the Mermaid Cavern, Hepburn ; *you* must show him the coast."

A stout, florid, and, notwithstanding his present trouble, a very cheerful-looking man, was Lieutenant Carey, though he had been pitted by the small-pox in a manner which, he was wont himself to say, was no mere seeming. Though it was his way to be eloquent upon whatever annoyed him, he was by no means of a repining character, otherwise finding himself a lieutenant still, after about forty years of sea-service, he might perhaps have considered his own case a hard one, and Lucky Bay rather a misnomer as his place of residence. But, on the contrary, not only did he make the very best of his position, but entertained the visionary idea that it would be improved some day; that to have a post in the coast-guard was not another name for being put on the shelf; and that a day would come when he would sniff the incense of official favour, and be rear-admiral of half the colours of the rainbow before he died. It was a happy faith, and must have been shared in those evil days of favouritism by many another gallant seaman, or surely the Lords of Admiralty would have all met their doom at the hands of naval Bellinghams; grey-headed mates must have hanged themselves from the yard-arm, and shipless commanders taken to fresh water in despair from the top of Waterloo Bridge. It was Lieutenant Carey's belief, in spite of some adverse evidence, that the Admiralty kept a favourable eye upon him. It was true, indeed, that there had been no indecent haste in promoting their protégé, but what they had said to themselves was this: "Whatever happens, we have John Carey in reserve; we know where to find him—we know where to lay our hand upon him; and by" (here they swore a little, as it was the fashion to do in those days, particularly when under the influence of friendly emotions)—"and by the Lord Harry, but some day we'll do it." That day was still indefinite, and being so, why, it might be any day. Therefore, Lieutenant Carey held himself constantly in readiness for promotion, kept his preventive station in an absolutely flawless state of discipline and perfection; and could have exchanged it for the stern-cabin of any vessel suitable for a young

commander of four-and-fifty at a moment's notice, and with a good conscience. In the meantime, he indulged his imagination by putting such superior ships in commission that were likely to fall to his share at first, and in reading his own appointment thereto upon the quarter-deck to a crew that had flocked in hundreds to serve under his respected name. He had even concocted a little speech, very short and very pithy, to deliver under those precise circumstances; and pending their occurrence, had repeated it to Marion, his wife, about one hundred and forty times.

"Don't you think it will be the right sort of thing to say, Marion?" he would inquire; and after every repetition, Mrs. Carey would gravely reply, "It couldn't be better, John." She took an immense interest in the alterations which he had determined to make in the cabin arrangements, which was the less to be wondered at since they had nothing but her own convenience and comfort in view; for in those days a sea captain in His Majesty's service was permitted to have his wife on board with him; and had it not been so, good John Carey's dream would have been robbed of half its pleasure. Marion had been the only daughter of his friend and co-religionist—for Carey was a Catholic, a circumstance which perhaps did not benefit his professional prospects in those days—Lieutenant Henry Linton, who was struck down by his side at the battle of Aboukir, by a spar from the French ship *L'Orient*, when that great vessel was blown to fragments with a thousand men in her, and with his last words he had commended the friendless girl to Carey's protection. No bequest, drawn up and sealed with whatever formalities, could have been obeyed with more duteous care; the idea of failing in such a sacred duty never entered into his thoughts; but the execution of it was not easy. Little Marion, at a girl's school at Hammer-smith, had first to be written to by the bluff sailor, who was terribly put to it how to break such bad news by letter; then the scanty pension the child received from government had to be supplemented from the

lieutenant's own purse, in order that her scholastic advantages should be still continued to her, and this necessitated a different system in his own expenditure, which for his means had been hitherto profuse, not to say prodigal. Then, when on shore, those interviews with Miss Backboard, the schoolmistress—who nearly had a fit upon his happening, in the ordinary course of conversation, to mention the Lord Harry—were very trying; and more embarrassing yet did matters become, when Miss Marion, grown to womanhood, seemed to have a difficulty in calling him papa, which she had done for the last half-dozen years, and could not kiss his weather-beaten cheek as usual without a blush upon her own pretty face.

Then with a delicacy of expression such as my Lord Chesterfield could not have achieved, although he had sat up half the night racking his brain for courtly phrases, the lieutenant just appointed to Lucky Bay had offered his horny hand to the friendless girl, to have and to hold in marriage, if such an unequal match could really be contemplated by her with favour; though if not, the hand was hers still, so long as life was in it, dedicated to her service for her defence and succour always. But Marion Linton accepted her benefactor as her husband, and had never had any serious cause to regret that she had done so. No kinder heart ever beat beneath a blue jacket, nor were its noble simplicity and unselfishness lost upon her. Each, as they imagined, owed a great debt of gratitude to the other, and every day, strange as it sounds, that debt increased by mutual repayment. Without uxoriousness, which was foreign to his bluff and healthy nature, he was as devoted to her as he had promised to be if he had not become her husband; while she was anchored to him fast by that trustiest cable whose strands are reverence and esteem as well as love. Lieutenant John Carey had, in short, fallen into luck's way at last, and, as it was his delight to boast, with small thanks to the Admiralty. Their favour had not been demonstrated, and was therefore

yet to come ; and how so likely to come as through their own official visitor, at present expected ? This it was that made the good lieutenant so chary of his hospitality at this particular juncture, and so anxious to shift the burden of entertaining his strange guest upon Raymond's shoulders.

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. STEVENS.

"MR. STEVENS," said the lieutenant, as he and the visitors from Pampas Cottage came up with that gentleman, "let me introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Hepburn. Although a comparative new-comer into the neighbourhood, Mr. Hepburn knows more about the coast than the coast-guard, more about the Mermaid Cavern than the mermaids themselves. There could not have been a more fortunate meeting for your purpose than is this. I could not have found you so good a guide had I pressed half the rascals in Sandby—smugglers mostly, by-the-by, whom this lady tends in sickness, and encourages by every means in her power; and he is an idle man is Hepburn. No inspection to attend to, no superior to stand in awe of."

"With the exception, I am sure our gallant friend must mean, of Mrs. Hepburn," said the stranger, with a smileless bow.

"Very good; very true; bravo!" responded the lieutenant, rubbing his hands. "My dear Marion, you should have been here to have heard what Mr. Stevens says."

"Well, my dear John, I am here now. Perhaps Mr. Stevens will be kind enough to say it again," said the lady in question, emerging from the little trellised porch, almost the only decoration by which the lieutenant's resi-

dence was distinguished from those of the men under his command. Then, without waiting to listen to the remark in question, she greeted Raymond and his wife, and began to caress the child, with much more fervour of affection than is usual with women who are wives, but not mothers. Mrs. Carey was very comely, and even youthful still. Hers was a face, indeed, which does not lose its youth even amid grey hairs and wrinkles, and both these were a score of years away as yet. But her chief charm was her voice—so gentle, so tender, so confidence-inviting to all who seemed to be worthy of her esteem—and she was very charitable in her estimation of that worthiness—and yet so dignified, so calmly courteous, distant as a star, when addressing those who repelled the trusty needle of her heart. Among the flock of rough fellows beneath the lieutenant's command, most of them would have laid down their lives for her sweet sake; but a few black sheep, conscious that she knew their characters far better than the simple lieutenant did, heartily wished him unmarried.

"Now, pray come within doors, my dear Mrs. Hepburn," cried she; "and if you and your husband will share with us our midday meal, it will be very kind of you."

"Well, the fact is, I am afraid of a storm," replied Raymond. "It would not do for my wife and child to be caught in one of your sou'westers. What do you say, oh most weather-wise mariner? Come, tell us the truth; though I own nothing would give us greater pleasure than to dine with such kind friends, and especially to-day."

"There, if we didn't clean forget it, Marion!" exclaimed the lieutenant. "Upon my word, this is too bad. And to call ourselves old friends, too!"

"Nay, Mr. Carey, your wife didn't forget it," observed Mrs. Hepburn reprovingly; "she whispered to me her congratulations when she kissed me."

"I assure you, my dear Carey, nothing of that sort happened to *me*," remarked Raymond with mock

gravity. "*I* have received no congratulations ; and *I* thought it a piece of great unfriendliness and neglect on your part."

"Pooh, pooh," answered the lieutenant merrily. "*I* don't care about *you* at all ; *I* was only thinking of your dear wife."

"Upon my word !" ejaculated Raymond, "but this is very pretty."

"She is not only very pretty, but very good," continued the lieutenant enthusiastically ; "and *I* was a stupid old sea-monster not to remember. My dear Mrs. Hepburn, *I* wish you many happy returns of the day."

"You hear that, Mrs. Carey ? " cried Raymond ; "he wishes my wife a widow, and more than once ! Because he is married himself, and cannot have her, he maliciously desires the death, not only of myself, but of any person who may happen to take Mrs. Hepburn's fancy after my decease."

"Is it possible ? " asked Mr. Stevens blandly, while the laughter still broke like running-fire from Raymond and the two ladies ; and the lieutenant stood smiling, but shaking his head, as though they were much too hard upon him. "Is it possible that Mr. Carey has wished this lady many happy returns of her wedding-day ? "

"That's just it," said the lieutenant ; "but there, *I* own always to forgetting that Mrs. Hepburn is married at all. *I* thought that *I* was speaking to a young school-girl like Marion used to be, and wishing her joy of her birthday. They look more like boy and girl, the pair of them, do they not ? "

"Mr. and Mrs. Hepburn are very young," returned the stranger, coldly ; "the happy day, of which this is the anniversary, cannot have been very far distant. Two years ago, *I* should say, at latest."

"By the Lord Harry !" cried the lieutenant, slapping his leg, "but Mr. Stevens has guessed it—guessed the very time that you two were made one. Now, *I* should

never have guessed it—never. Indeed, my private opinion is, that it's all nonsense still. They're not married, bless you; they're only children playing at being married—although, to be sure, there's Milly——”

The consciousness of having said something indecorous, here struck the lieutenant dumb; like that figure-head of the good ship *Flame*, which reposed in his own look-out, his cheeks grew red and swollen, while, for want of a trumpet to blow, they emitted a loud and prolonged whistle.

“Milly is rather an uncommon name,” observed the stranger, breaking the somewhat embarrassing silence: “it is the short, I conclude, for Melissa.”

“For Mildred, Sir,” replied Mrs. Hepburn courteously. “She is named after myself.”

“A pretty name, and a pretty child,” returned the stranger, leaning forward, and regarding it with attention. “But, dear me, she seems very timid.”

It may have been, as Mr. Stevens said, that the child was easily frightened, or it may have been that his own countenance, being morose and stern, was not calculated to inspire an infant with much confidence; but certain it was that Miss Mildred Hepburn here set up such a wail of dissatisfaction as caused her removal within doors, which, of course, compelled the secession of the two ladies.

“I am extremely sorry, Mr. Hepburn,” observed the stranger apologetically; “I ought to have remembered that I have a very repulsive exterior, although within, I trust, I am not less well-meaning than other people.”

“My dear Sir,” replied Raymond, much distressed, “there is no need for such contrition. No one can calculate upon a baby's whims and fancies. Carey was saying you want to see the coast-line hereabouts. Now, if you are going to make any stay here, I shall be delighted to be your guide. But the fact is, I shall be from home the next two days; I have to go to Mar-

mouth to-morrow about engaging a sailing-boat for the summer."

"And those are the only two days I have at my disposal," replied the stranger regretfully.

"I tell you *what*," exclaimed the lieutenant; "you could walk with Hepburn as far as you please upon his way, which lies along the most magnificent part of the coast, over the East Downs, and then—if you didn't mind—you could walk back again."

"Thank you," returned Mr. Stevens drily; "but perhaps I should be an incumbrance to Mr. Hepburn."

"Far from it, my dear Sir," returned Raymond earnestly; "I shall be delighted to have your company. I am quite grieved that you have come at so unpropitious a time; for the fact is, I have generally nothing at all to do; and, indeed, our friend here—when he does not happen to be expecting a visit from his superior—is not overworked either."

"Don't say that, Hepburn—don't say that," broke in the lieutenant; "I have plenty to do, and I hope do my duty, although it is not so agreeable to me as that which would fall to my lot if I were afloat.—Ahem, ahem."

"What on earth does Carey mean?" thought Raymond. "Why does the good soul boast himself after this fashion, and then cough as if he was ashamed of it? It is evident, however, that he wants to get this fellow off his hands. With regard to the Mermaid's Cavern," added he, aloud, "I have thought how an opportunity may be afforded Mr. Stevens of seeing that. Is it not the day after to-morrow that your provision-boat comes in from Marmouth? Well, why should it not drop this gentleman at the cavern on its return-voyage?"

"A capital idea!" quoth the lieutenant, thoughtfully. "But then it's a weary way round the cliffs back again, unless there is somebody to show him the short cut over the Downs."

"Well, I dare say my wife will show him," answered Raymond, good naturedly. "I am vain enough to think

that time will hang heavy on her hands in my absence. She and the nurse might just as well walk to the Mermaid's Cavern as anywhere else; while I know little Milly will be delighted with the sea-flowers."

"I cannot venture to ask such a favour as that," observed Mr. Stevens, gravely.

"I will ask it myself, my dear Sir," returned Raymond, with cheerfulness, "and let you know to-morrow."

"Thank you very much," cried the stranger.

"And *I* thank you, too," quoth the lieutenant, slapping his young friend on the back. "But let me tell you one thing, Hepburn, although it may seem somewhat inhospitable, you have only half an hour or so to get home with a dry skin. The storm is brewing apace yonder. One of my men shall go with you with a couple of boat-cloaks, and an umbrella also, if you please; although I doubt whether an umbrella can live in such weather as is promised by those clouds."

"Permit *me* to carry the boat-cloaks," entreated the stranger, earnestly; "let me do something in return for the trouble I am about to give, and in reparation for the mischief I have involuntarily committed. Moreover, by that means I shall learn where your house is, at which I conclude I am to call to-morrow morning in order to accompany you on your journey."

"I am sure you are very polite," returned Raymond, frigidly, not altogether relishing, perhaps, the addition of the self-invited stranger to their little party in a walk upon that particular day. "Here is my wife, I see, all ready, warned of her danger by prudent Mrs. Carey, I do not doubt."

"I have turned her out of doors, laughed that good lady, as she followed her guest into the garden, "for it is not right that either she or the child should be caught in the coming storm. If she could have dined and slept here—and we have both bed and board to spare, although of the humblest—that would have been an excellent

plan ; but she said very rudely that she would rather be at home, alone with you."

" 'Welcome the coming, speed the parting guest,' is a motto that we think highly of in the north," observed Mr. Stevens, gathering the boat-cloaks, which the lieutenant had brought out in the meantime, under his arm.—"I believe that Hepburn is a northern name, by-the-bye, is it not?"

"I dare say it is," answered Raymond, drily ; "but we are southern folks ourselves.—Good-bye, Mrs. Carey ; good-bye, dear lieutenant."

"Good-bye, Hepburn ; and God bless you," whispered the old gentleman, "for being so civil to that lubber ; he has taken quite a fancy to you, it seems, and declines to let me accompany you, and help to carry the cloaks. Do you know, between you and me, I can't help thinking that he may be the Inspector himself ; that's why I stopped you just now when you were saying that I wasn't over-worked. I have told him that I haven't a moment I can call my own. Now, do you go on being civil to him—there's a good fellow. It's just the sort of device the government would adopt in order to see if a fellow's doing his duty ; just the sort of thing, too, for doing which you would give a man a round dozen on board ship. But there—that's all a matter of opinion. When the Admiralty has once got its eye upon a fellow, they try him in all sorts of ways, to be quite sure he is genuine. There is certainly something underhand in this Stevens's looks, though it only struck me for the first time when I introduced him to yourself. I am pretty confident he *is* the Inspector."

Without much belief in the surmise of the good lieutenant, the expression of his wish was quite sufficient to make Raymond more than courteous to his new companion. He walked a little in advance of his wife and Mr. Stevens, for the child he carried in his arms was still curiously impatient of the latter's presence ; but while he did so, he managed to converse about the locality and its wonders in a manner that seemed to interest the stranger greatly ; so much so, indeed, that he

rarely interrupted him, except with some interjection of admiration or agreement; nay, even when Hepburn pointed out some object of interest within view, Mr. Stevens would bestow but a passing glance upon it, and then his keen grey eyes would flash back again upon the speaker, and be riveted upon him as fixedly as before. Ere they parted, it was quite settled by the two gentlemen that their purpose of walking together towards Marmouth the next morning was to hold good, no matter what should be the weather; while Mildred, upon her part, promised to take her walk on the day after in the direction of the Mermaid's Cavern, if the expected storm should abate sufficiently to make such an expedition feasible.

"I suppose Mr. Stevens knows," said she to her husband, "that the cavern is only open for two hours, even in these low spring-tides."

"Yes, I have been informed of that," returned the stranger. "The tide will leave it free on Thursday between two and four. If the weather be fine, I shall stay there to the last moment, in hopes of Madam's coming; so I hope she will not leave me to drown."

"I am afraid you will be well-nigh drowned this afternoon before you get back to the station," observed Raymond. "The rain is beginning already; see how the mist comes on like a wall. Yonder is our little cottage; we, for our part, are quite safe now. But you, Sir,—will you not step in and rest a little?"

Perhaps the invitation was not given very cordially: at all events the reply was in the negative.

"Not to-day, Mr. Hepburn. I will do myself the pleasure of calling for you to-morrow, however, at the hour you mentioned. I wish you a very good-evening, Sir, and Madam."

"He did not offer to shake hands, and as if to prevent their doing so, stepped backwards as he bowed his farewell

"Good-bye, Sir," replied the Hepburns, bowing in their turn, "good-bye until to-morrow."

"Ay, good-bye until to-morrow for *one*," muttered the stranger, as he set his face against the driving mist; "good-bye until the next day for the other. If this be not killing my two birds with one shot, it is bringing them down with a double-barrel."

CHAPTER XX.

A NIGHT OF STORM.

"RAYMOND, dear, do you know I don't like that man?" said Mildred earnestly, as they sought the shelter of their little cottage.

"Yes, I do know it, my love," returned her husband laughing. "You looked at him, when he frightened little Milly with his ugly face, very much as you would look at an ogre sharpening his teeth before a baby-feast. He is, however, only one of those uncomfortable persons who take even their pleasures sadly. It is only charitable to suppose that there is something really estimable lying deep hid within such undemonstrative folks, which would exhibit itself, if an opportunity of sufficient magnitude should occur. Under ordinary circumstances, they certainly appear morose and disagreeable enough. But it is the poor lieutenant who has cause to complain rather than we. A couple of walks with this Mr. Stevens is the limit of our self-sacrifice; but to have such a wet blanket for a guest in one's own house, in weather like this, with the idea, too, which Carey has got hold of, that he is a coast-guard inspector in disguise—why, with all his seaman's superstitions, I should think he would consider Friday next, which rids him of his friend, a lucky day."

"But Mrs. Carey doesn't think he is an inspector," observed Mildred thoughtfully.

"Well, I hope not," laughed Raymond, "for I never saw her behave so frigidly to anybody since that scoundrel, Lieutenant Topsell, threw the poor, half-drowned Newfoundland back into the surf last winter, and she declined to sit down to dinner with him. What does she think about this Stevens?"

"She scarcely knows what to think; but she has a half suspicion that, instead of his being a coast-guard official, he is upon quite the other side. The landlord of the *Crown* is an obliging person, and stands very well with the lieutenant, but, as she thinks, without much reason. He has endeavoured to show himself a friend to the Revenue upon more than one occasion; but his informations are always laid a little late. At the present time it seems the Lucky Bay people have received a hint from other quarters that 'a run' is to be soon attempted upon a large scale, and, of course, if this be so, a spy such as Stevens in the enemy's camp would be invaluable."

"I should have thought Mrs. Carey was too sensible a woman to entertain such far-fetched apprehensions," answered Raymond carelessly; "but whether this gentleman be coast-guardsman or smuggler is no concern of ours, but of the Revenue. So long as we are in these parts, I have made up my mind to mix myself up with neither side. We have never bought a yard of lace or a bottle of brandy since we have been here, although I doubt if those commodities are to be got anywhere else so cheap as in this hamlet of Sandby; upon the other hand, it is not my business to tell Carey that Simon Reeves has got a cellar under his hearthstone, or that Walter Dickson's boat has a false bottom. That was the new parson's great mistake here, and which has entirely destroyed his usefulness. A priest of our religion would have been more adroit. And yet, to find himself blocked out of his own pulpit, on the very first Sunday, by kegs of *eau de vie*! Can't you fancy old Reeves explaining in a whisper, from the clerk's desk beneath, that there was really nowhere else to put them for a day or two, and requesting his reverence to preach from where he was, in-

stead of shifting !” Raymond roared with laughter at the picture he was thus drawing of a circumstance that had actually occurred but lately in the parish church ; but Mildred scarcely smiled. Again and again her husband rallied her upon her silence and melancholy ; at dinner, when he toasted her lovingly in a full bumper, and made her drink a glass herself to the health of little Milly, she did contrive to cast them off for awhile ; but afterwards, as the evening drew on, and the storm increased, her vague forebodings once more seemed to take possession of her, and after one or two attempts to win her to cheerful talk, Raymond himself grew silent.

Conversation, however, was by that time rendered almost impossible by the violence of the rain, shuddering against the windows, and beating with monotonous thud upon the straw-thatched roof. After they had retired to rest, and Raymond had fallen asleep, and the waxen lids of the little child in the cot by her side were closed in slumber, Mildred lay wide awake, consumed with shadowy fears. To be in the same room with one who sleeps is, in some respects, to be more lonely than if quite companionless. There is something awful in the thought that, though the body is there, the soul of our companion is probably far away ; that the reins of his own being are out of his control ; that he is separated from us, and even from himself, as thoroughly, for the time, as though he were dead. The quiet breathing may indeed assure us that he lives ; but the shut face and motionless limbs irresistibly remind us of that time when those eyes will never open to gladden us more, or those lips bless us with gracious speech—when we shall be alone indeed, and all the sympathy that man can heap upon us will not avail to fill up the aching void in our hearts by ever so little, and when the best comfort that God himself can give us—or so it seems to our poor stricken souls—is to let *us* die too. I doubt if it is usual for even the most worldly-minded—the merest slave of scrip and share—to weave, under such circumstances, the same gross web of contrivance that solely usurps his thoughts by day. He does not surely lie on his sleepless pillow while his

true wife slumbers by his side, calculating still, like some horizontal triumph of Professor Babbage, without one thought of Him who made him and the hushed world rotating without, and the stars which no accountant can number.

At all events, such was always a solemn time to Mildred Clyffard, and would have been solemn now had it not been terrible. The world was far from hushed, nor were the stars shining. The elements were at deadly strife, as we mortals say, when rain and wind are only fulfilling God's word ; and except that the forces employed were far from prodigious, it was wonderfully like a battle among men. There were pauses when the powers of the storm seemed gathering themselves together as after a repulse, only to make a more tremendous onset. Then the skirmishers—the sharp, thin, driving rain—were pushed forward in countless thousands, and the tempest came rolling up behind them, column upon column, while the heavy guns thundered ceaselessly—the awful diapason of the sea ! Then, again, at the bidding of some solitary blast, which might well be taken for a trumpet sounding the recall, the legions of the air would grudgingly retire, and gather together as before.

Mildred was no coward ; but oppressed as she now was by premonitions of evil, the viewless war that was raging without appeared to have some affinity with the vague dangers that seemed to threaten her and hers. Mechanically she stretched her arm over her unconscious child, as though to protect her from some imaginary foe. If Heaven should see fit to take her husband from her, what *would* become of their child ? She might not herself die—as she would wish to do—having that sacred trust, the guardianship of the little Milly, committed to her ; but how should she be able to fulfil it ? It was not the apprehension of poverty, the fear of being unable, in such a case, alone to support the child, which struck a chill to her mother-heart ; but the sense, should Raymond be removed, of the utter defencelessness of their position, and of the unswerving resolution of their mortal

enemy. During the first year of her marriage, and while her husband was all in all to her, she was not thus troubled. From what she knew, indeed, of the implacable disposition of her aunt, she was well aware that the endeavours to discover their whereabouts never flagged, and that, when found, some terrible vengeance would be attempted, and perhaps perpetrated. Still—suppose the very worst that could happen—suppose they slew her Raymond—well, let them slay her also. It would not be difficult for one like her to die, having nothing left to live for. But now, with little Milly, although Raymond was no dearer to her than before—for that he could not be—yet how infinitely more precious was his life ! Even this deep sleep of his filled her with the sense of separation. How would she feel, then, when he should in reality have left her ? She did not venture to picture the *loss* of him, though a sudden shrinking of the heart told her that such a thought had passed unbidden athwart her brain ; but how would she feel *to-morrow*, when he would in reality be absent ? How would she feel in such another night of storm, when there should be no protector beside her, whom she could wake with a touch, as now, and cry, “ Raymond, I fear ; ” and straight be comforted ?

Her husband had never left her for a single night before. She dreaded his absence beyond measure, although she could not explain her fears even to herself. The expectation of it had thrown a shadow upon her life ever since she had heard of his intention of going to Marmouth, and had even saddened, as we have seen, the anniversary of their marriage-day. Ay, it was now two years since she had escaped from that dread slavery—from the woman who had claimed her very heart to dispose of as her own—and began to breathe an atmosphere of liberty and love. For two years, her former task-mistress had been foiled in her schemes of vengeance, for that schemes she had had was as certain as that the thunder-cloud holds the lightning. But was it always to be so ? Was not this present happiness too great to be enjoyed, notwithstanding that it was thus marred by her

fears? Would not those fears be one day realised? And at what time was this more likely to take place than when Raymond and she were temporarily separated? Upon whom would the blow first fall?

An intermission longer than usual was taking place in the elemental war without; mutterings only were to be heard, as though the powers of the air were counselling together as to the point against which they should next direct their fury.

Suddenly, and yet with the naturalness peculiar to the situation, for nothing that occurs to our minds at such a time seems strange or to demand inquiry as to how it got there—suddenly, Mildred's thoughts reverted to Mr. Stevens. Why did Mrs. Carey dislike him so? A good woman, if ever there was one, was the lieutenant's wife; sincere and pure, and with a marvellous faculty for discernment of character, which the pure sometimes possess—even the simplest, such as children—as though the crystal soul shrank from gross contact, as the Venice glass shrinks and proclaims the presence of the poison. As for herself, Mildred was aware of the want of foundation in her own suspicions; she suspected every stranger of boding them no good. That very Lieutenant Topsell, whom Raymond had spoken of that afternoon, she had identified in some manner with their enemies; and indeed his merciless and brutal character seemed to have fitted him for the ally of her she feared. But she had been mistaken in that case, and had done the poor wretch wrong, who had since then met with his end, and not discreditably for that matter, fighting against overwhelming odds in his lawful calling. But this Stevens, who had given no evidence of an evil disposition, why did she shrink from *him* in spite of herself? Why had she shuddered to see his cold grey eyes riveted upon Raymond? And why did the threatened absence of her husband on the morrow seem to lower more menacingly because he was to be accompanied by this man upon some portion of the way? She had no fear but that her Raymond was a match, and more than a match, for him, but his very strength and courage made him careless and

unsuspicious ; and, besides, what could the strongest arm avail against a deadly weapon ?

While her mind indulged itself with this ghastly apprehension, she was by no means insensible of the extreme improbability of the event her imagination thus foreshadowed ; but the idea grew upon her nevertheless, until she had made up her mind to send Mrs. Carey a private note in the morning to entreat that the lieutenant would accompany his guest in the proposed excursion. She knew that the wife would sympathise with her terrors—doubly unreasonable though they must seem to her, who knew nothing of the Hepburns' former history—and she knew that the gallant coast-guardsman would run the risk of losing promotion to a line-of-battle ship, no matter how imminent it might seem, rather than let her suffer the heart-ache. As for meeting Mr. Stevens herself in the Mermaid's Cave, on the ensuing afternoon, that might be considered afterwards ; sufficient for the next day was the possible evil thereof. In the meantime, she had mentally arranged for Raymond's safety. Thus relieved from her more immediate fear, and the rain and wind keeping an armed truce, if not subsiding, tardy sleep touched her eyelids, as it had long ago sealed those of the other two occupants of that little room. Mildred's spirit, too, was freed from the trammels of the flesh, and roamed, only God knows how, through space and time. How long she slept, a minute or an hour, she could not tell, but she awoke with a spasm of terror, amid the raging of such a tempest as made what had preceded it seem but as the light winds that diversify the calms of summer. Were her companions drugged, that they slept through it ? She took the child into bed with her, and hugged it close, as though in fear that the whirling eddies which thundered down the chimney, and made the night-lamp flicker and flare, should snatch her from her side. Was that a step upon the balcony outside—close outside their very chamber-room window ? or a falling brick ? or a——“ Raymond, Raymond, they are breaking in the house-door ! ” At the top of her voice, she shrieked, while she shook her hus-

band by the shoulder. The next instant he had leaped from the bed, and snatched something from beneath his pillow.

"Let them beware," he cried; "their blood be upon their head." Then pressing his left hand to his forehead, he added, more calmly, "I am not myself, Mildred. Did you call?"

"They are in the house," said she; "do you not hear them? They have torn the door off its hinges."

"I hear the rain beating and the wind roaring, Mildred. The door must have been blown in. I must get it shut, and put up the bar, or we shall have the roof lifted off our heads."

Putting on some garments hastily, he was about to leave the room, when he felt a hand upon his shoulder. Mildred, ashy pale, and in her dressing-gown, with the still sleeping child clutched in her arms, was standing beside him, making signs that she would go too. Terror had deprived her of the power to raise her voice to the pitch necessary to make herself heard in that great tempest.

"I am not going to take the lamp with me," cried he, smiling at the tone he was obliged to use. "Never fear, love; I shall not leave you in the dark."

But she, like one stone-deaf, only shook her head, and followed him down stairs to the little passage where the wind was pouring in like a deluge through a broken dike. The whole cottage rocked like a tree. It was not so dark but that they could see what had happened—the door was off its hinges, and was jammed back on the wrong side against the wall. Through the gap could be seen the steady light from the little Pharos above Lucky Bay; a cheering sight to Mildred, glad to feel that there were fellow-creatures there, up and about their usual task, and even counteracting to some extent the awful effects of the storm; perhaps, too, it reminded her of that eye which, although we may not care to look for it in fair weather, watches us always, and in the storms of

life beacons us to haven, and in the night of death is a star of hope.

"Hold this, dear Mildred : nay, your hand shakes ; let me leave it on this step."

Raymond put down the thing he carried, and shouldering the wainscot, while his wife watched him from behind the angle, advanced step by step. Twice he essayed to heave the house-door into its proper position, and twice was borne back with it against the wall and bruised. The third time, taking advantage of a moment's lull, a lucid interval in the mad fury of the storm, he managed to close the door, and put the bar up. Then they went over the little house, seeing that all was safe. The cook and housemaid were sitting up in their respective beds, with their night-caps tucked behind their ears, as though the storm was an oratorio of which they would not have missed a note upon any account, but both in tears. Mildred affected to laugh at their fears, and endeavoured to reassure them ; but when she once more sought her own couch it was not to sleep. A new and totally unexpected cause of apprehension had now taken possession of her mind.

Why, for the first time during their married life, did her husband sleep with a loaded pistol under his pillow ? Was *he*, too, beset by a presentiment of imminent peril, or was he cognizant of some real danger, the nature of which he was concealing from her ? Mildred did not dare to ask him the question, for very dread of what might be the reply.

CHAPTER XXI.

INTERCEPTED.

PALE and haggard from her almost sleepless night, arose Mildred Hepburn, and wrote her note in secret, and despatched it to the coast-guard station by a trusty hand. The elements which had denied her rest were now at amity. The rain was over and gone; the winds were whistling carelessly enough their favourite tune, *Over the hills and far away*; and the dark clouds, scattered and bleached, were hurrying over a bright blue sky. Even the sea wore a smile upon its lips, still white with wrath, and strove to look as though its great green waves, which were tossing about for leagues upon their crests the fragments of men's floating homes, and, not far down, their drowned and mangled limbs, were only at play. There are storms, of course, in day-time, but the wind loves the night, and under her black wing more often works its malice than in the day. The sunshine, like a healthy public opinion among men, seems somewhat to restrain it. Upon this April morning, at all events, it showed no trace of malign fury, but seemed to delight in practical jokes, such as whirling the white pigeons of Sandby Farm (which considered itself inland) in twice as many circles as their own spiral habits would have suggested, and so bewildering them with the speed thereof, that they scarcely knew themselves from gulls; also meeting with the round hat of Mr. Walter Dickson,

mariner, stuck on merely, as it seemed, by capillary attraction to the extreme back of his head, it tossed it hither and thither, and "skied" it, and rolled it, and "chivied" it, like a good-natured mob at a fair; and not like a blood-thirsty rabble, greedy for rapine and ruin, as had been its behaviour but a few hours before.

Nevertheless, these high-spirited proceedings of the zephyrs were far from relished by Mr. Dickson, not too well pleased, in the first place, with his appointment of special messenger to Mrs. Hepburn, since it involved his visiting the coast-guard station: he would have done anything in the world for *her*, and indeed he was doing even this; but it is impossible for any gentleman who trades in lace, and owns a vessel with a false bottom, to perform with cheerfulness a service which brings him into personal contact with the guardians of the revenue. No one with any feeling would select from among all his acquaintances a notorious pickpocket, or even a receiver of stolen goods, to go on an errand for him to the sitting magistrate at Bow Street; nor would Mrs. Hepburn have employed Walter Dickson on this particular mission if she could have helped it. But, in the first place, he was her nearest neighbour, and there was no time to spare, since Mr. Stevens was expected very early; and in the next place, the objection of being connected, openly or secretly, with the contraband trade, lay against every man, woman, and child in Sandby, who looked upon French brandy and Brussels lace as productions of their own labour, and upon a coast-guardsman as "the interloping foreigner." The high tariff of import duties in those days was certainly an example of a law but for which many men would have been free from sin; like the game-laws of to-day, it begat, as its immediate effects, treacheries, blood-shedding, murders, as well as indirectly producing a general lawlessness—a hatred of all laws as tyrannies. The ill-feeling thus engendered between the governed and their governors manifested itself with greatest intensity, of course, in its first stage; that is, between the actual violators of the obnoxious law, and the parties whose duty it was to uphold it. A smuggler

would behave towards a coast-guardsmen as he would behave to nobody else who was his enemy. Sandby men, who had wives and children of their own, to whom they hoped God would be merciful, by preserving to them their bread-winner, had made women widows and children orphans in that little colony at Lucky Bay before now, with but small scruple. Even on a windy night, it was not probable that a blue-jacket so used to the cliff as Robert Deans, for instance, should have been *blown over it*; which happened in January last, during a dead calm, and, by a curious coincidence, on the very night when a large cargo was known to have been run within half a mile of the spot; or even granting so much out of an abundant charity, William Boyce, another guardian of the revenue, could scarcely have dug that pit on the sea-shore for *himself*, in which he was found dead one winter's morning, with only his head above the shingle.

Nor is it to be supposed that all the cruelty was exercised upon one side. There were men at Lucky Bay ready to slash with their cutlasses upon very slight provocation, and who looked upon a Guernsey shirt as a very pretty mark for a pistol-bullet. Worst of all, perhaps, informers infested the neighbourhood, and sowed suspicion everywhere, making bad blood even, where it should have flowed most purely, in the veins of kinsmen. Writers who are not practically acquainted with troubles of this sort generally fall into the error, when describing them, of making it appear that, notwithstanding all crimes or vices which may be generated by such a state of things, the courtesies of life, the ordinary relations of man and man, go on pretty much the same as under more favourable circumstances. But this is far from being the case. No war is carried on with that distinguished politeness which it presents in the cream-laid pages of the historian, and civil war least of all. When coast-guardsmen and smuggler met one another in the neighbourhood, incidentally and during what I may call the intervals of business, they did not give one another "good-day:" and if they spoke at all, they consigned each other's eyes and limbs to everlasting

perdition. Even when engaged upon a lawful calling like the present, Mr. Walter Dickson fully expected the roughest of receptions at Lucky Bay. A perceptible stiffness seizes the most affable of medical practitioners, when a homœopathist enters the same room; a county magistrate addresses a poacher, even non-officially, in tones which he generally uses towards the canine world rather than the human; and I think I have seen a clergyman of the Established Church turn almost livid when brought into connection with Baptists. Similarly, Lieutenant Carey, although a most capital fellow, was by no means rose-water to the enemies of the Revenue. Moreover, as I have said, there was just now a rumour afloat of some great robbery (as *he* considered it) to be presently committed upon his Majesty's customs in those parts, and it was not wholly out of the range of probability that he might suspect Mr. Dickson of having lent his lug to the tempter on this occasion, as he had often been known to lend his lugger.

Altogether, if commissionaires had been an institution of those times, and Mr. Dickson had happened to find one waiting for an errand in so unpromising a thoroughfare as that between Sandby and Lucky Bay, he would have preferred to hand over the handsome guerdon which Mrs. Hepburn had given him for his trouble, as well as something out of his own pocket, to get this letter taken to Mrs. Carey by other hands. He did not, indeed, find a commissionaire, but he found Mr. Stevens, who had strolled out with a cigar (and a spy-glass) before breakfast, a quarter of a mile or so on the Sandby side of the Look-out Station. Perhaps we shall not go far wrong in supposing that from that post of espial he had seen Mr. Dickson coming, and had purposely gone forth to meet him.

"A fine fresh morning, my good fellow," observed this gentleman carelessly. "Was there much damage done at your place by last night's storm?"

"Not as I knows on," replied the messenger gruffly; "but the fact is, I came away before my eyes were well open, for the wind kept me awake with blowing the

shingle off my roof, and when I should have had my snooze this morning, I got this to carry to the preventive station;" and he held out the letter to Mr. Stevens at arm's-length, as a man does who has got a material grievance to expatiate upon.

"Well, as far as that goes," rejoined the stranger, "I can save you the rest of the walk, and welcome, as I am the guest of Lieutenant Carey at present, and am going back to his house at once to breakfast."

"Well, you see, it's got 'Private' written upon it," observed Mr. Walter Dickson indecisively; "and yet"—here he scratched his head with extraordinary vehemence—"I have no great fancy for putting my head into that there hive yonder, even to deliver a letter, and that's the truth. But I ask your pardon, Sir; perhaps you may belong to them blessed 'Bluebottles?'"

"Not *I*, my friend," rejoined the stranger laughing; "the very cigar I am smoking came to my lips free of the Custom-house. I am only here to look at some of your sea-sights—the Mermaid Cavern, and so on. I came, too, recommended by mine host of the *Crown*—" here he sank his voice, and looked cautiously about him—"which should be a passport—should it not?—to all free-traders."

"Perhaps it should, and perhaps it should not," returned the other warily. "The coast-guard station is a queer place for an honest man to put up at: the rat doesn't trust the dog, you know, that lies in the same basket with the cat."

"And yet, if he offered the use of his teeth to carry a letter," laughed the stranger, "I should think even the most cautious of rats might accept *that* service. By all means, carry it yourself, however, if you think it right to do so, although I should have thought that the word 'Private' referred rather to the contents of the letter than to any particular hand by which it was to be delivered."

"Ay, that's true enough, master, surely; and if you're going to breakfast with the lieutenant and his wife, it's like you'll have an earlier opportunity of giving her this

here than I, for them Bluebottles is sartin to keep me hanging about, and listening to their sauce, instead of taking in the letter direct."

"Very good," observed Mr. Stevens, quietly pocketing the note; "I will see that Mrs. Carey gets it at once."

He nodded carelessly, and turning upon his heel, sauntered back in the direction of the preventive station; while Mr. Dickson, not displeased at having been spared the most unpleasant portion of his errand, walked hastily Sandby-ways, without once looking behind him. If he had entertained any suspicion of Mr. Stevens as a letter-carrier, and had kept his eyes turned westward for a few minutes, he would have remarked that that gentleman was a considerable time emerging from the little thicket which lay between him and the Look-out. This interval was spent in a manner which few besides the late Sir James Graham could have conscientiously commended. Nothing was easier than to untwist the little note, which had neither seal nor fastening of any kind, except that moral one conveyed by its superscription, "Private," and the contents were his own (by appropriation) in half a minute.

"DEAREST MRS. CAREY,

"Pray *beseech* the lieutenant to accompany Mr. Stevens and my husband in their walk this morning. This is a very silly request, I know; and yet I think you will grant it, even without having a reason assigned by,

"Yours affectionately,

"MILDRED HEPBURN."

Mr. Stevens folded up the letter as before, and placed it in his waistcoat pocket, with an unpleasant smile. "No, Mrs. Raymond—Hepburn," soliloquised he slowly, "I don't think that plan will suit me. Two is company—for a little way—but three is none. What a very fortunate thing that I was at the Look-out, and thereby able to anticipate your little arrangement!"

Mr. Stevens had not been the only person among the figure-heads that morning. Early as it was, Mrs. Carey

had stepped out there with the intention of telling her guest that the tea was "made," and had been an unseen witness to the interview between him and Dickson. This so greatly strengthened her suspicions of his connection with the smuggling interest, that she ventured to confide them to her husband. But from an inspector of coast-guard stations to a sort of polite Will Watch, was too many points for the opinion of the lieutenant to veer round all in a hurry. He had only begun to admit the possibility of Mr. Stevens's not being a direct emissary of the Admiralty, when the object of their discussion appeared coming up the little garden.

"Let us see whether he mentions having seen Dickson," said Mrs. Carey hurriedly, and the next moment their guest was seated at the breakfast-table. Not a word did he utter about any such meeting, and very little about anything else; ever and anon, Mrs. Carey shot a glance of significance at her husband, as much as to say, "Did I not tell you so?" but the conversation languished. It was felt a relief by everybody when the meal was finished, although the host had something of embarrassment to endure still, when Mr. Stevens observed, "Come, lieutenant, if you cannot be my companion for a longer walk, you will, at least, accompany me half-way to Sandby." And poor Mr. Carey dared not say "No," albeit he was burning to have his talk out with his spouse concerning the character and intentions of this inexplicable person; nor was Mr. Stevens satisfied even with dragging him half-way, but compelled him to accompany him to the height corresponding to the Look-out, upon the Sandby side of the bay. There, in sight of Pampas Cottage, the stranger struck his forehead theatrically. "Upon my life, Mr. Carey," cried he, "I believe I might just as well wear a turnip as this head of mine. I have clean forgotten a letter which a messenger from Mrs. Hepburn intrusted to me this very morning to give to your wife's hands. But stay; I don't think you must open it, for you see it is marked 'Private.' I won't detain you another moment; pray, take it back at once, and make my humblest apologies; pray, do—pray, do!"

Mrs. Hepburn, watching in the little garden, had beheld with a grateful heart the appearance of the lieutenant with his guest upon the western hill-top; and her disappointment was extreme when she now saw the former shake hands with his companion with the evident intention of returning. She even beckoned to him with her hand to come on; but although he took off his hat, in token that he saw her, he only shook his head emphatically, and walked rapidly away homeward.

CHAPTER XXII.

BESIDE THE BEACON.

MR. STEVENS pursued his way to Pampas Cottage, and as he waited for the servant to answer the bell, pulled out his watch somewhat ostentatiously, as though he would observe, "I am a punctual man; I trust I shall not have to wait." Mrs. Hepburn had withdrawn within doors, but he was well aware that this piece of pantomime could not be lost upon her or on anybody else who chanced to be in the down stairs' sitting-room; and when he was admitted he took his umbrella in with him, as one who has come not to make a call, but to take a walk, and who expects to start immediately. He had his reasons for not wishing to waste time; while poor Mildred, who was quite overwhelmed by what seemed the desertion of the lieutenant, did not know that she had any interest in delaying his departure. Not five minutes elapsed, therefore, before Raymond and the stranger were climbing together the down behind the cottage, and Mildred with her child in her arms was watching them, and fashioning with dumb white lips a prayer for her husband's safe return. At the top of the down, he paused and turned, standing up against the horizon very distinctly. There he motioned to her a farewell, kissing his hand twice, once for her, and once for little Milly, as she well understood it, then vanished over the brow of the hill, while her own fingers were yet upon her lips. Mr. Stevens

lingered an instant behind him, and seemed to imitate her gesture, mockingly, like some malignant Spectre of the Brocken. She had promised to meet this man on the morrow at the Mermaid's Cavern, and be his guide homeward; yet she now feared nothing at his hand for herself, but everything for Raymond; and although she knew it not, she had good cause for fear.

The two men pushed swiftly on their way. There was not enough sympathy between them to make them slacken their pace for the convenience of conversation. They walked, rather, like the Alpine amateurs who walk for walking's sake, and about whom the professional guides they employ would, I should think, be very unwilling to express their own private opinion. When, however, they came to any remarkable spot, Raymond would pause, and courteously explain to his companion whatever of interest belonged to it. Their path lay almost always close to the verge of the chalk-cliffs; but every now and then a huge cleft, riven by some convulsion of nature, or worn away by the constant action of some little river, would compel a *détour*. These sheltered spots, wooded for the most part to the very verge of the ribbed sea-sand, were very lovely, but in the eyes of an inhabitant of the locality, their picturesqueness had but little claim upon his regard. They were all more or less used for smuggling purposes: not a boat lying up high and dry on the shore that tempestuous morning but had held at one time or another its contraband cargo—and about each there was a tale of adventure, and peril, and blood to be told, to which Mr. Stevens seemed to lend an attentive ear. The downs themselves, with many a velvet hollow, meet for the noiseless passage of the cloud-shadows, many a tiny dingle, dotted with gorse, and shaggy with thorn, were by no means without their story. More than once, the wayfarers would come upon the "barrows," or burial-places, of the long-forgotten dead—some rifled of their contents by brutal curiosity, but others still intact, with the same earth upon the mouldering bones which Briton or Saxon, centuries ago, had placed with pious hands above their dead. These

tumuli were invariably upon some lofty ridge, as though the dying wish of those beneath them had been to be laid within the spot from which their homes, and fields, and all the little world which they had known in life, could best be seen.

Some observation of this sort Raymond made ; but his companion only shrugged his shoulders, not seeming to appreciate antiquities, or the reflections arising therefrom, so much as the tales about "Will Watch."

"What does it matter, when a man is dead," observed he roughly, "where his bones are put to?"

"Very true," replied Raymond. "Still, one has a fancy in these matters. One would not like to lie unburied, for instance, with one's bones picked by obscene birds, and whitening on a desert ; or in the depths of ocean, tossing about with shell and sea-weed, and sucked by the cold lips of toothless fish."

"You are fastidious, Mr. Hepburn," responded the stranger, hammering at the rounded turf with irreverent heel.

"If it be so to prefer land to water for a last resting-place, I am," returned Raymond. "It is, as I have said, but fancy. Still, I would like to be laid where my wife and child could come to look upon the earth which to them at least would be sacred ; nay, like these ancestors of ours, I confess I would rather find my last home where all the scenes around had been familiar to me during life."

"We have not all that choice," observed Mr. Stevens coldly.

"Nice, agreeable, cheerful companion this," said Raymond to himself. "I hope he is not going to tire himself by walking with me too far."

Almost immediately, and as though in answer to this unexpressed thought, Mr. Stevens stopped ; he did not, however, hold out his hand to say Good-bye ; he pointed with it to a dark object looming upon a crest of down far in advance. "Why, what is that?" he muttered. "It looks like—like a gallows!"

So haggard, so wild, and yet so menacing was the

stranger's appearance as he made this inquiry, that Raymond might aptly have retorted, "And *you* look like a gallows-bird." But he only answered, smiling, "For one who has no foolish fancies such as we were speaking of but now, you seem strangely moved by Marmouth Beacon. It is certainly black, and it is made of timber, but I never knew it taken for a gallows before. A beacon has stood, in some shape or another, on that promontory, which is one of the highest cliffs in the south country, for perhaps a thousand years. In the middle ages, it flashed forth its warning far and near, whenever an invader threatened; it did good service, too, when the Spaniard would have laid his yoke upon us, and told with a tongue of flame when his great Armada made the deep yonder twinkle with myriad lights, like another heaven."

"Ay, he would have brought back the old faith," said Mr. Stevens carelessly, but with a stealthy glance at his companion.

"I am a Catholic myself," answered Raymond simply, "but I would not force my creed down a nation's throat at the point of the sword. In these times, as during the late war, the beacon is only used as a telegraph. Those wooden arms, which give it, as you say, so ghastly an appearance, have a vocabulary, when made to speak, of many hundred words, which on a fine day can be heard, or rather read, miles and miles away."

"Are there any people stationed there to work it?" inquired the stranger.

"No, not now: the wooden hut is pulled down where the semaphore men used to live, and at present I suppose it is one of the most lonely places hereabouts. From the sea, it is totally inaccessible; the cliffs everywhere are sheer; and except by the coast-guard in their night-patrol, I doubt whether it is visited once a week by any human creature. If you would like to pass by it, however, it will not take us much out of our way."

"I should like to do so much," replied Mr. Stevens. "I have never yet been close beside a beacon, nor even seen one before."

"Yet hereabouts they call them See'emafores,"

observed Hepburn laughing. The fresh, clear air, the rapid walk, had worked with Raymond's naturally healthy animalism, and put him in high spirits, which even the companionship of the sombre Mr. Stevens could not damp.

"You are pleased to be jocular, Sir," responded that worthy; "in our north country, such mirth is held to be a bad sign. 'Against ill-chance,' it is said, 'men are ever merry.' We call it *fie*."

"Indeed!" responded Raymond, laughing still. "I never knew that a poor pun was held to bring bad luck; and yet I know the north country well, too."

"I thought you told me yesterday you were from the south," observed the stranger gravely.

"I have lived in both north and south," answered Raymond in some confusion. "Now, look at those little lumps of chalk which run to and from the Beacon, like the outlines of some children's game. Without them, the coast-guardsmen would never find his way at night; and once some cowardly scoundrels, for whom smuggler was far too good a name, arranged them after dark so that the poor wretch, thinking that he was only upon his usual beat, fell over the cliff-top."

"And was killed, I suppose?" inquired Mr. Stevens.

"Killed!—ay; if he had had nine lives, he must have lost all before he reached the bottom. Whether a man fell from yonder edge upon sea or shingle, it would matter nothing to him by the time he reached either. See! the very rabbits in the warren there have left a space between their burrows and the hideous steep, and squat at a respectful distance. The poor victim's name is carved somewhere upon the Beacon itself: yes, here it is—a more fitting record of his fate, perhaps, in such a place, than any other monument:

ABRAHAM PRICE—*perit*——

"The date is already erased by the wind and weather, but the thing took place but a very few years ago."

"But why *perit*?" inquired Mr. Stevens with unwonted

interest. "That is not the Latin for 'murdered,' is it?"

"Well, not exactly, I believe," laughed Raymond; "but the fact is, the crime was never brought legally home to the wretch, although the finger of justice seemed to point him out as clearly as yonder arm is pointing to you."

The stranger looked up in the direction indicated by his companion, then staggered back with his face pale as ashes. The long black arm of the telegraph was grimly covering him, as a musket covers its mark.

"Well, for a gentleman who entertains no silly fancies, I must say you are easily frightened," observed Raymond with some contempt. "Why, Marmouth Beacon is quite a scarecrow to you. I should have almost thought you were the conscience-stricken murderer himself, but that I happen to know he has paid the forfeit of his crime. He was the very man I was telling you of who was shot through the head by Mr. Topsell, at the second 'chine' we came to. His name was Peter Elliot.—Take care where you are going to, Sir, for Heaven's sake! You are standing too near the edge, unless you have a very steady eye."

"I am never giddy from physical causes," returned the stranger coolly, "although, as you have been good enough to remark, some things make me nervous. Do you mean to say that a man would have no chance for his life who fell from here into deep water, when the tide was well up—as it is now, for instance?"

"Not the very slightest," returned Raymond confidently. "Where we are now, the cliff overhangs a little, and we can see nothing beneath us; but turn your eyes a few feet westward, and you may see in yonder precipice a counterpart of the sheer steep upon whose beetling edge we stand, so lofty that the roaring of the surf which, sycophant-like, licks the huge white wall it slowly undermines, cannot reach our ears; so smooth, that there is scarce a foothold save upon the ledges where the sea-gulls breed, and the foolish guillemots stand in ordered line, by scores and scores."

"Still, this very smoothness would have given the poor wretch you spoke of a greater chance; he would not at least have been dashed from rock to rock in his descent, and at the bottom there is sand, I see."

"Nay," returned Raymond, "but you see no sand, and your mistake is a proof of the great height at which we stand. What looks like sand from here, so brown and small, is a beach of rounded stones, which would dash the life out of a man, though he fell but one quarter of this distance, while the next ebb-tide would bear him out to sea; and yet——"

"Ay, what? You were going to say something. You think a person even in such a strait might yet be saved?"

"Not so, Sir; I was calling to mind how in this very spot I saw the bird-catchers at work last spring. No less than five were clinging to the face of that same precipice, with nothing but a rope of hide apiece to anchor them to life. I saw one being drawn up with a young fulmar—the oily gull—in either hand, striking his foot against the smooth chalk, and bounding out into the very air, as though he scorned even a foothold; and all that time he was bawling jokes to his mate upon the edge here—who merely *held* the hide, like reins—upon whose strength and presence of mind his existence solely depended. Some of these adventurers do not have a mate at all, but trust to a mere stake, which they themselves drive into the earth above, and to which they fasten their rope. The only difficulty they seem to find in the matter is at the last part of their unassisted ascent, when they have to jerk themselves from the face of the precipice, in order to insert their hand beneath the rope and the cliff-edge. No accident, indeed, happens, I believe, either bird-catching or samphire-gathering, but well has Shakspeare called it a 'dreadful trade.'"

"You interest me immensely," said Mr. Stevens; "for all we know, then, there may be half a dozen folks beneath us, whose presence we know nothing about."

"No, not to-day," returned Raymond; "the wind is

far too strong for——Lord have mercy upon me ! Help, man, help ! Stain not your soul with murder !”

With one strong push between the shoulders, the treacherous stranger had thrust his companion over the cliff.

He had fallen, of course, but not sheer ; his great muscular strength and agility had enabled him, even in that instant, to twist round with his face, and not his side, towards the precipice ; and there he clung, a few feet below the edge, with his nails dug into the soft chalk, and his feet striving for, and even attaining a momentary hold.

CHAPTER XXIII.

OVER THE CLIFF.

RAYMOND was well aware that the period of his existence must now be numbered by seconds, unless the heart of this treacherous ruffian should relent, whose sullen face was looking down from the cliff-top upon his dying agonies.

"There is still time, man," he gasped, "to reach down your arm, and save a fellow-creature from death, who is not fit to die. So help me, Heaven, I will forgive, nay, bless you, if you will!"

"Forgive *me*, Raymond Clyffard!" replied the stranger scornfully. "Nay, the debt is even still upon your side, and be sure I will exact it to the uttermost. You have found a resting-place, I see, which perhaps will last you (although, I am afraid, the nature of the chalk is friable) while you listen to what I have to say."

Hideous as was Raymond's position, closely as the mysteries of futurity were pressing upon him, yet he could not but inquire of that wicked gloating face, "What devil, then, art thou?"

"My name is Gideon Carr," returned the stranger hoarsely. Then Raymond's face grew white as the cliff to which he clung, and as damp, with the dews of the terror of death, for he knew that he could expect no mercy.

"Ay, well mayst thou groan, young Raymond. It

was your turn to laugh when you stole away Mildred Leigh from your brother's arms——"

"He never set you to do this," interrupted the doomed man passionately. "I am sure Rue never did."

"You are right, Sir. Your brother being a lunatic, has not the sense to plot revenge. But when you wronged *him*, you crossed the path of my sister Grace, and you had better have balked a tigress of her meal."

"But would you do murder for her sake, man? My arms are getting stiff, my fingers ache. God sees us both from yonder heaven. Ah, save me and yourself too by one good deed."

"Ay, it is but natural for one in your position to raise theological arguments," returned Gideon coolly. "But for me who am safe on the top here, I prefer to take a practical view of matters. You ask me whether I would commit what you are pleased to describe as a murder, although nobody else will take that view of it. I parted from you at yonder 'barrow,' where you expressed your intention of going by the Beacon for the sake of the view. (I was constructing this little story as we came along from that very place, and I think it will do capitally). My last words, as I left you there, were, 'Pray, be careful of the cliff; you do walk so very near the edge, my dear Mr. Hepburn.' If your body is never found again, as you just now guaranteed would be the case, when you little thought you were talking of yourself, then I need say nothing; and I am afraid you will suffer the inconveniences you hinted at as we came along, which result from being denied the rights of sepulture. But if your body *is* found, then there is my little story to explain your latest mischance. But I am digressing, and you have no time to spare, I'm sure. You would say, 'Why slay me for your sister's sake, since I have not injured *you*?' But you *have* injured me, Raymond Clyffard; and, like Grace, I never forgive. Long ago, she and I together made up our minds that we would have Clyffe Hall; that the Clyffards of Clyffe should die out, and the Carrs rule there in their stead. Once get you out of the way, and marry Mildred to that poor fool, your brother, and we

should have him, through that girl's influence, under our thumb ; he would leave his lands to the proper persons ; and having done so, would evince—but after a decent interval, so that there might be no dispute about his testament—such evident symptoms of lunacy as to cause him to be shut up—say at the Dene, in custody of his loving relatives. A nice plan, was it not, and yet you and this minx, my niece, chose to thwart it ! Ah ! if you had heard the vow Grace Clyffard made upon the day you fled, it would have made your heart sink, and your cheek grow cold, even when you kissed your bride. Grace always hated you ; but when this plain-spoken, honest lad, forsooth, turned out a plotter, and a successful one, her fury well-nigh choked her. I do believe, although she loves her wealth, she would give ten thousand golden pieces to stand where I do now, watching your useless struggles on the verge of death. ‘Kill him’ cried she, on the very day when we found out your whereabouts, but a few weeks ago ; ‘be sure you kill him, Gideon ; and if it *can* be done let him die some dreadful death ! First take her protector from her——’”

An involuntary shudder passed through Raymond's frame, and into his face, wrinkled and wan as though with age, entered a new agony.

“Ho, ho ! what ! that pricks you, does it ?” grinned his torturer. “You tremble for your dainty, fair young wife. You may safely leave her to her relatives, young Sir. Is she not our niece ? Do we not owe her an old score upon the mother's account ? Did not *she*, like herself, run away from our good care, and marry in spite of us ? Mrs. Hepburn is coming to the Mermaid's Cave to-morrow, she and the child too. The spring-tide rises fast, you tell me, in these parts—so fast that a stranger like myself might very well be caught by it. Nothing, indeed, could be more likely. Well, the tide *does* catch us ; and after a resolute but unsuccessful attempt to rescue them—this is my second little story—I am compelled to swim away in order to save my own life. *They*, unfortunately, cannot swim. Now, you see, I have confided to you my

whole programme, feeling confident that your sense of honour will prevent your revealing the particulars to any human creature. How surprisingly strong you must be in the arms, Raymond Clyffard! I had no idea that I should have a listener so long; however, you are perceptibly slipping now. There is a curious furrow on your right, down which you will probably glide to your destination. It almost looks like a path from here." He paused to gloat upon his helpless, hopeless victim, then continued: "Now, what would you not give, if I reached down my arms to you even now, and acknowledged that I was merely playing a practical joke? What would you not give, I say, to grasp the hand of Gideon Carr, the touch of which would at this moment be more grateful than that of any hand in Christendom, however fair, since *it* can save thee, and no other? Come, what will you bid? Will you give Clyffe? Will you make over all that would be yours, if your brother should die without a will?"

"I will give you all I have," gasped Raymond; "but Clyffe is not mine to give—it is my child's."

"What! the child's that is to die to-morrow!" cried Gideon scornfully. "Listen to this man, foolish guillemots; rabbits of the warren, prick your ears: here is a case you will understand. What a hand at bargaining is this unhappy gentleman, who has about a second or so to live! He offers, as ransom for his life, not even the money which I have already in my pocket! The door standing wide open he wants to haggle with one about giving up the key. It is impossible that one can treat with a person of this character. You are growing very weak indeed, Raymond Clyffard—you seem to me to be *in extremis*. Have you got any bequest to make? Your last words will be interesting. I can answer for that at least as respects one person—namely, my sister Grace. I will send them to her by to-night's post, I promise you, with all the details of your misfortune."

"Tell her, then," said Raymond, speaking with laboured breath, "that I bequeath to her the malediction of a murdered man. You smile; but the hour will come

when it will take effect. I know it as surely as I know what fate awaits me within the next few moments. May the bane of that ancient race, of whom she has been the evil star, cling to *her* as it has clung to us! May she inherit with our lands the curse which has pursued us through so many generations!"

"Your good wishes shall be faithfully transmitted," returned Gideon mockingly; "but I own to you they are unlikely to bear fruit. My sister Grace is the wisest woman I know, and the least likely to lose her wits like you proud foolish Clyffards. Why, look you, the Clyffards were always boastful of their genealogy, yet not one of them could count such a 'long descent' as is now awaiting you! I do not often joke; but upon occasions of this sort, *dulce est desipere* (one of the few phrases I ever picked up at school) *in loco*; that is to say, it is well to be merry on the brink of a precipice."

"Thou art *fie*, Gideon Carr," replied Raymond solemnly, though speaking with great effort. "Thou art on the brink of the precipice of death. Well mayst thou shrink and grow pale. I tell thee, I, myself, a dying man, can mark the sheet wound high upon thy wicked limbs, the token of black doom that stands behind thee—close."

Involuntarily, and with a face almost as white as that of his victim, Gideon Carr glanced over his shoulder.

The next moment he was alone.

Beneath him were the marks in the wet cliff, where the poor wretch had struggled and clung, but the failing limbs had given way during that instant, the body had slipped down the furrow into the viewless air. Scarce a sound had until now been heard save the voices of the two men, in that unequal talk; but now, as though released from some horrible spell, the thousand sea-birds which had been sitting upon the ledges, or hovering about their nests, seemed to send forth one great cry of horror and alarm, and up they came swirling from the abyss below, with scream on scream, and circled round in

the clear blue like wreaths of snow, as though appealing to high Heaven for murder done. The silent warren shone with timorous eyes ; from every burrow stared a harmless face, which ne'er till now had looked upon a crime ; and what seemed worst of all, the rusty semaphore, noiseless heretofore, began to shake and creak, as the accusing winds swept by, and bade it point them out the manslayer !

Gideon Carr, to do him justice, was not one to shrink from any conflict, man to man, or even against odds ; but he was by nature, like his brother, superstitious. Of religion he had none, not even that faith made up (if one may say so) of the worst part of religion, which finds divinity in hate instead of love, and clasps pale fear in place of roseate hope ; and looks for night, and worse, instead of the dawning of the eternal day. He feared, as Clement said, neither God nor man. But his mind, which could see nothing in the firmament or in the ocean to suggest a Creator, entertained many a gross and vulgar article of the creed of the unlearned. To him, the future fashioned itself after the shape of a coal out of the fire ; the croak of a raven would secretly fill him with forebodings, and the chatter of a jay with joy ; secretly, I say, for he was ashamed of these weaknesses of his, and it was only very rarely that he betrayed to others the fact of their existence. It is also fair to add, that like most people similarly credulous, he had never been prevented by any portent from committing a bad action, or constrained by any omen to perform a good one. When the crime was committed, however—as now—which he happened to have in hand, Gideon Carr became a prey to his superstition ; and moved by he knew not what, except that it was no sting of remorse or touch of compassion, he fled from the strange sights and sounds that filled earth and air about Marmouth Beacon, and which his own act seemed to have evoked, with a fleet foot and a wet brow.

CHAPTER XXIV

A SECOND WARNING

NOTHING, except seeing her husband return safe and sound, could have been a gladder sight to Mildred Hepburn on that fatal morning than what she did see within an hour or so of Raymond's departure—namely, the kindly sympathising face of Mrs. Carey. The lieutenant accompanied her to the cottage in the slender hope that the two pedestrians might not yet have started ; but finding that they had gone, he returned to the preventive station, by no means grudging his pains, although not without a good-humoured laugh at Mildred's foolish fears. He left a little portmanteau behind him, "which," said Mrs. Carey, "please to let me put in your room, Mildred."

"What!" replied that poor lady, attempting to be jocular, "is it something so valuable that you dare not leave it at home, but have brought it to this fastness of Pampas Cottage, garrisoned so strongly by myself and little Jane the nursemaid?"

"Well," returned Mrs. Carey, kissing her, "the fact is it's my brushes and comb, and just a few things for a couple of nights, which I have invited myself to pass with you, my dear, until Mr. Hepburn comes back again to scold you for being in such a fright about nothing."

"Oh, my dear, dear Mrs. Carey," cried Mildred, "this is more than kind indeed. And, ah me," she in-

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voluntarily added, "how little have I deserved it at your hands ! "

" Bless us and save us ! " exclaimed the honest lady, " one would think you had done me and the lieutenant some grave injury."

" And so we have," exclaimed Mildred passionately ; " for to mistrust the honest, and to deceive the pure of heart, is a grievous wrong. I feel as I have never felt before—so lonely, desolate, friendless—I *must* tell you all about it, or I shall go out of my mind."

" Stay, my dear," said Mrs. Carey kindly, but placing a finger on her friend's eager lips : " you must not do anything in a hurry, and particularly when your husband is not here. I have long known—although I do not know if others suspect it—that you carry some burden about with you, deep in your loving heart. But I do not blame you for it ; and unless I can help you to carry it, I do not wish to know its nature."

" But you *can* help me, my dear and only friend. I yearned to pour my sorrow out before you, scores and scores of times. Ah, what have I not suffered from your love and kindness ! Like some imprisoned bird that sees through glass sunshine and the trees, but feels that between him and them an invisible wall of crystal intervenes, and shuts out all—such is a secret between loving hearts. And yet—although I know my husband would not mind, for he has often told me to tell you if I would—now I have said so much, I seem to wish I had never spoken. Things are better as they are, perhaps. It is such a sad, sad story."

" Nay, Mildred, do not weep ; come out into the cool fresh air. The open air is best for sorrow, for Dame Nature's hand, though rough, is kindly—at least I have always found it so."

" *You !* dear Mrs. Carey—well, dear Marion, if you will have it so—why, what can you know of sorrow ? "

" Not much, thank God, my friend," replied Mrs. Carey earnestly ; " and if He seems to *you* to have been good to me, who know not what He has done for a poor orphaned, friendless girl, how much more gracious and

benign should He seem to me. No, dear, as you say, I have no sorrow ; there is no room within my heart for aught but gratitude."

"And love. I am sure that there is room for love," said Mildred tenderly.

"Yes, dear. It would be strange, indeed, if He, who is Love's self, should have withheld that precious gift." And yet Mrs. Carey sighed. "You know, I hope, that John is dearer to me far than life ; my father, husband, benefactor, friend—my all in all. A blessing for which I bless God every day. But we were never boy and girl together, like Mr. Hepburn and yourself ; and when I married, I was not so young but that I—— Look you," she interrupted herself smiling, I am like yonder pampas grass, that has everything comfortable and snug about it, with an attendant in white marble to keep it moist and green, but which has little or no bud in spring-time."

"Ay, but in autumn, when the flowers fade and die," cried Mildred, "it blossoms in a hundred feathery sprays, and none of them will perish, even though they be gathered from the stalk."

"Yes, dear, I know," said Mrs. Carey quietly ; "they are pleasant to have about the house (when, as you say, there are no flowers to be got), although their blossom is grey."

The two women did not speak for a little, but each held the other's hand. Then Mildred led her guest to a sheltered corner, where a seat was cut out in the cliff.

"I think I will tell you my story now," whispered she.

So hand in hand they sat, with their fair faces first in shadow, then in sunshine, then in shade again, as the morn grew to afternoon, while Mildred Clyffard told her tale from first to last.

"Am I anxious, fearful without reason ?" ended she. "Have we not cause to fear, with a foe such as this aunt of mine ?"

"Much cause," returned Mrs. Carey, gravely, "and much need for friends. No harm is done at present,

but I wish you had told us this before. The lieutenant——”

“What! You will not tell *him*?” cried Mildred, starting from her seat. “Oh, what will Raymond say?”

“He will say I should have no secrets from my husband,” replied the other firmly. “No, *none*, Mildred, *none*; not even that one whereof I spoke just now, and which should have been his and mine alone, but that I saw you needed some great confidence to lure forth your own hidden woe. John would have given you helpful counsel, for, though he is trusting and simple about his own affairs, he is both wise and keen when acting for others.”

“He could not picture a woman like my aunt,” said Mildred with a shudder; “no one could, who does not know her—so relentless of purpose, so unscrupulous in means, and actuated by such deadly hate.”

“Ay,” returned Mrs. Carey, musing, “to be foiled by her whom she had thought her own instrument—that must have been wormwood to such a one as you describe. A woman that knows nor shame nor fear, is dangerous indeed. Yet—you seem to dread some physical harm—is it possible that she would incur the risk of——”

“To gain her end,” interrupted Mildred, solemnly, “Grace Clyffard would dare the gallows.”

“Nevertheless, you have done wrong, and very wrong,” pursued Mrs. Carey, “to hide yourselves away, and so to let her know that you fear her.”

“It was I,” said Mildred, in low and broken tones. “My husband would have defied her to the teeth. But I—I know her so well.”

“Poor child—poor child!” cried Mrs. Carey, tenderly. “This woman has done you harm enough already: to have inspired such terror should be a sufficient triumph to the most malignant. And yet, if you lived under your own names, and were known to all about you, and if your aunt was known to wish you ill, it would not be risk she would be running, did she work you harm, but the certainty of detection: the blow she aimed at you would

scarcely fall before the arm would be pointed out that struck it. But now, if you had not told me this to-day, why, your husband, your child, yourself, might be involved in some sudden catastrophe, the clue of which it would not be possible for us to discover. I do not wish to terrify you, Mildred, but I do think that you have taken the very means—— Hark ! did you not hear the garden wicket go ? ”

“ I did,” gasped Mildred, starting up, and running into the cottage, at the back of which was the arbour in which they had been sitting——“ I did ; and little Milly is playing in the garden all alone.”

Mrs. Carey followed, not without some undefined apprehension, which set her orderly pulses beating thick and fast. The visitor, however, was no one more formidable than a curly-headed youth, who called occasionally both at the cottage and Lucky Bay, bringing with him fresh eggs and other delicacies from Westportown. This afternoon, however, he was without his basket, and bore in its place a large leathern bag, suspended from his shoulders.

“ Please, Ma’am, the letter-carrier have been took ill this morning,” observed he grinning, “ and I’m a-doing postman for him ; only, what with driving here and there, and then back again, because of missing somebody out, and likewise the horse being dead beat, I’m afraid I’m rather late. Here’s a letter for Mr. Hepburn, Ma’am, and that’s all.” And off trotted the deputy-deliverer of his Majesty’s mails.

“ A bill from Westportown, I suppose,” said Mildred, scrutinising the somewhat hieroglyphical address ; “ and yet does not this word in the corner look to you like *Immediate*, Mrs. Carey ? ”

“ It is as like as the writer can make it,” returned that lady confidently. “ How unfortunate that your husband did not get it before his departure ! ”

“ Perhaps I had better open it,” said Mildred ; “ something may have to be done at once. I hope it is not from Marmouth about his boat, or he may have taken his journey for—— Great Heaven, what is this ? ”

'Beware of the man calling himself Stevens, who lodges, I believe, with the coast-guard.'

'YOUR WELL-WISHER AS BEFORE.'

And Raymond has gone with him alone," cried Mildred, passionately "I shall never see his bright and glorious face again!"

It was terrible to see how the light faded out of her own features as she spoke, and how the large and lustrous eyes lost all their light, as the note fell from her nerveless hand, and fluttered to the ground.

Mrs. Carey picked it up, and scanned it closely. "Never be frightened by an anonymous letter, Mildred; it is almost always the weapon of the base and cowardly. Suppose this Stevens is an honest man after all."

"No," replied Mildred with a shudder, "I will not suppose that. Dame Nature, whom you praised just now, has told me otherwise too plainly."

"Still, man to man, your husband is more than a match for him."

"Yes, but unsuspecting——"

"Nay, not so, Mildred," interrupted the other; "look you, 'your well-wisher *as before*.' This is not, then, the first warning your husband has received."

"True, true; and that explains why he now sleeps with a loaded pistol beneath his pillow. I would that he had taken his weapon with him this unhappy day."

"Stay, Mildred; there is need of judgment here; there must be no rash leaping to conclusions. You do not know what schemes, what treacheries, are ever working about us, born of this wretched smuggling. I do not think it, of course—let me not offend you by what I say—but has your husband any connection with those who call themselves freetraders? I do not ask you to betray him; whatever you tell me shall be held as secret as the grave. I know there are many persons, otherwise honest, who have dealings with these people. If this man Stevens is, as my husband thinks, an officer of the government, this warning may have well been sent to Mr. Hepburn in case he be concerned——"

"No, no," sighed Mildred hopelessly; "I wish it were as you suggest; his life, at least, would then not be in peril. We are good friends enough with all in Sandby, but we have no dealings with the law-breakers."

"Nevertheless," quoth Mrs. Carey, "I should like to see that first letter to which this present one seems to refer. It is almost certain to be more explicit, and from it we might gather at least from what quarter to expect the danger. I will wait here while you search for it, and try to shape some course to follow, if things should be as you fear, and this warning date from Clyffe."

"We have very few possessions," returned Mildred with a sad smile, "and no hiding-places that I am aware of. If Raymond has not taken the letter with him I shall find it in five minutes."

It was well that Mrs. Carey's woman's instinct had suffered her friend to make that search alone. Truly, it was no extensive one, but somehow everything of Raymond's had acquired in those few hours of absence a sort of dearness which made her linger over each with reverent hands, and grudged that any but her own should touch them. There was a picture of herself in their little drawing-room; but, lo! she now found another, drawn by him, her lord, in pencil, and, by the date, before he had been her declared lover, and with it a certain rosebud, dead and withered, which she had given him at his request, before her heart had learned to leap at his footfall; along with these was one little lock of Milly's hair—a very history, in brief, of his love for her from dawn to mellow noon: true records, fading to the eye, but to the heart fresh as the sundew, fragrant as the May. Then in a drawer, his "secret drawer" he used to call it, but the spring was broken some days back, through making it leap out to please the child, she found the thing she sought, and would have rather found an adder coiled.

"Beware, Raymond Clyffard. The cat's eyes have found you out at last; find another hoal for a little; and at once. There is danger lurking at your very door."

"A TRUE WELL-WISHER."

And straightway, when she read these words, the things that were her Raymond's seemed in Mildred's misty eyes not only dear, but sacred—sacred as the farewell breathed from a mother's lips on one who sails for alien climes to dwell there, and who cannot hope to see again on earth that tearworn face, now tortured by its love, that smiled upon him in his cradle—sacred as the last words of a dying man, who points to his orphaned child at play among her toys, and whispers, "Thou wilt not forsake her, friend ; thou art fellow-guardian of her now with God himself ;" for death seemed shadowed forth on that poor scrawl, as certainly to her who read it, as though it were a tombstone telling, "Here Raymond lies ;" and by that awful hand all things are consecrated, no matter how common, with which our loved and lost have had to do.

No weeds could have made Mildred Clyffard look more widowed, than when, with her white face all drawn and gaunt, she sunk down on her knees beside her husband's vacant pillow ; and there, while she strove to pray for mercy, mercy came, and numbed her pain with swoon.

CHAPTER XXV.

BY THE SHORT CUT.

"HERE is your child, my dear, here is little Milly; will you not kiss your child?" were the first words which Mildred heard upon recovering her grief-stricken senses. It was Mrs. Carey that uttered them, who had lifted her upon the bed, and was sitting patiently beside it with the little girl in her arms. She laid her precious burden down by the mother's side, and let the round large eyes of the infant do their gracious work.

"I have read that letter, dear," said she, "and I do not augur so ill from it as you do."

Mildred groaned, and put up her hand to hide the torture of her face.

"If this Mr. Stevens intended any evil to your husband, it is clear he would not have come home."

"Come home!" cried Mildred, starting from the pillow with the look of one who, shipwrecked in the tropic seas, beholds from his lonely raft some succouring sail: "Raymond come home?"

"No, love, not Raymond."

The rounded arm on which the listener leaned gave sudden way, and with one long-drawn moan, the head sank back upon the pillow.

"But this Stevens has come back, for I have seen him, and even spoken with him. He called here just after you left me on the lawn, and very much surprised he

seemed to be at seeing me here. However, that he has returned instead of taking to flight, as he might easily have done, convinces me that at present no mischief has occurred. And if these warning letters be genuine, we are now forewarned."

"What did this man say?" asked Mildred, with eyes tight shut, as though to keep out some hideous vision.

"He said your husband bade him look in here on his way back, to remind you that you should be at the Mermaid Cavern by three o'clock to-morrow at latest, if Milly is to see the sea-flowers. Mr. Hepburn and he parted company, he said, on Marmouth Down by the Saxon Barrows."

"Ay, at the grave-side," said Mildred hoarsely. "And now he thirsts for this little life and mine."

"If you have any such foolish fancy, Mildred, you should not go to meet this man."

"What! disobey my husband's last command? No, my friend; I go to-morrow as he bids me."

"Then I go with you, Mildred, that is certain: nay, but I *do*. You are rather obstinate, my dear, yourself just now; but compared with *me* when I have made up my mind to anything, you are Docility personified—ask John else. I am not afraid on my own account or yours; but if we have Milly with us, I shall take one of our men from Lucky Bay to help to carry her, if we tire."

"True friend in need!" cried Mildred; "my mind seems feeble as my limbs. I cannot think at all, but only suffer. Yet cannot the road be searched where this man went with Raymond, and the—the cliff?"

"That has been done, dear. One of the coast-guard followed them this morning, directly I got your letter. He met Mr. Stevens returning, very near the spot where he says he parted with your husband, and then went on as far as (by the time) the two could possibly have gone together, a mile beyond the beacon, but there was no trace of anything wrong."

"Thanks, thanks, dear Marion; I have no right to despair, having a friend like you. This little one, too; yes, you are right, she shall not go with us to-morrow."

"That's a wise woman ! Now Mildred is like herself again. But one whole day, and you will have your husband back, I promise you ; and in the meantime, fear not this man at all. The lieutenant has had a word from me, and will watch the man as a cat watches a mouse. My husband's honest heart takes all he does not know for good ; but being warned, his hand is like a vice to grip the wicked. Woe, bitter woe to him who plots against an unprotected woman and her child beneath John Carey's eyes ! This Stevens is a very bold and crafty villain, you would say ; but he with whom he has now to deal is keen, although not cunning ; and as for boldness, I do indeed believe my husband would, in his shirt-sleeves—in the cause of honour or duty—defy a lion."

Mrs. Carey laughed, but while she spoke, the fire of honest pride glowed in her cheeks and eyes, and made her pleasant face one glory.

"So, Mildred, without being very brave ourselves, we may rest to-night without fear. Come, you must have some tea, and then to bed ; and this young lady, too, must be persuaded to retire, since such late hours are bad for her complexion."

I think unto the house of sorrow there is no human blessing equal to a breezy-minded woman, tender at heart, but chary of her tears, ready to listen to woe, but not to flatter it, and, Martha-like, careful to fulfil the ordinary duties of the house, whatever earthquake may have shaken the pillars of its peace.

The night passed, thanks to Mrs. Carey, without alarms ; and when the next day, at noon, the two friends set forth upon the inland way which led by a short cut to the cliffs above the Mermaid Cavern, the clouds of evil foreboding had thinned, so that a little sunshine straggled through, and found its way to Mildred's heart. It was a lovely walk ; the fields, with garments various and rich, were welcoming everywhere the presence of the spring ; the woods had donned their beautiful green robes, and all the incense-breathing earth was bright and glad. Now there road lay through

lanes with lofty banks, by nature's lavish hand set thick with flowers, and where overhead the pale sprays of hawthorn upon either side strove hard to kiss; and now it climbed some hill-top, from whence many a mile of pleasant English ground, with hall and hamlet, church tower and low white farm, wooed their willing eyes.

"This is the third time," said Mildred apprehensively, when they had gone a considerable distance, "that looking back I have perceived that man yonder; he pretends to be gathering violets whenever we turn round, but I do not like his following us in that manner. When we pass Mr. Jasper's farm, we will step in, and then he must needs miss us."

"Pooh, pooh, my dear; do not flatter yourself that the gentleman is so interested in our proceedings," said Mrs. Carey, laughing; "see, he has deserted us already, and has taken that path across the fields."

"I am heartily glad of it, Marion; for now that you have put me in better hope about dear Raymond, I am ashamed to say I begin to be alarmed about ourselves. I almost wish that we had got that escort with us you proposed, in case of our having brought little Milly."

More lanes, more hills, more beauties on all sides; and now the banks decrease, and become mere rounds of green, and the road dwindles to a turf-track, and presently is lost upon the boundless down. Now, too, the thunder of the unseen sea breaks in upon the inland harmonies, and the scented air grows fresh. "We are very late, dear Mildred; we must not tarry now; it is long past three."

These words of Mrs. Carey referred to a disinclination evinced by her companion to arrive at their destination; a scared and hare-like look had once more taken possession of her, as though she beheld some object of fear behind and about her.

"Did you not hear some sound like a human voice, Marion?"

"Yes, love; our west winds are full of such cries,"

returned Mrs. Carey, coolly. "When I first came to live in these parts, I used to open our bed-room window, both before and after the gales, under the impression that some one lay outside in pain. The sea, too, is getting very loud; I think it must be near mid tide."

"But we were to be at the cavern long before that, were we not?"

"Yes, if we took Milly to see it; but not otherwise. Why should we trouble to descend the cliff, and then toil up again? We have only to guide Mr. Stevens home. He cannot mistake the only path that leads hither from the shore, and when he has got up, he cannot fail ——"

"There he is!" interrupted Mildred, hastily. "How my heart beats—how my knees tremble! But why is he lying down?"

"That is not him," returned Mrs. Carey, confidently; "it is a larger man even than he."

"Yes, great Heaven!" cried Mildred; "it is the very person who has been tracking us all the way, and who pretended to take the path across the fields. Marion, my friend, we are betrayed, and it is I who have led you into the snare. May Heaven and you forgive me! Your husband never will, I know."

"I think he will," rejoined the lieutenant's wife, laughing, "for that is Robert Andrews, one of his own men. I did not feel so brave as you did about this expedition at starting, so I begged to have a body-guard, in case we wanted one. It was I who beckoned him, behind your back, to take the field-path, and so get here before us. You are not vexed, are you, Mildred?"

"I am grateful beyond all that words can say," answered Mildred, fervently.

At a sign from Mrs. Carey, the man arose, and came forward to meet them.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Stevens?" inquired she. "Is it possible that he could have missed us after coming up the cliff?"

"Quite impossible, Ma'am. If your head can stand looking over here, you will see that yonder is the only

path up from the bay ; and, except at low tide, one cannot get round either point. The cavern lies almost underneath us. If he had come up here on the down, we must have seen him ; there is no shelter except that very lane as you came by ”

“ But the tide has now risen quite high, Robert, and he cannot possibly be in the cavern.”

“ Not unless he be a merman, Ma’am,” assented Andrews, grinning and touching his hat, as though in apology for joking before his superior. “ My own belief is as the gentleman got sea-sick, and was landed a good way short of this. He may be back at Sandby, or even Lucky Bay, by this time.”

“ Back at Sandby ! ” cried Mildred with clasped hands ; “ then he may even now be at the cottage ! Home, home, for Heaven’s sake ! Why did I ever leave my child ? ”

With that she turned, and began to retrace her steps, without waiting to hear what comfort the lieutenant’s wife was endeavouring to find for her. Moreover, Mrs. Carey’s face belied her cheering words ; it was pale and full of apprehension ; and after one more glance at the insatiable sea, which had already devoured the shore, and was sucking with greedy lips the cliff itself, she hastened after her friend.

CHAPTER XXV1.

THE EMPTY HOME.

THE road which the two ladies had taken from Sandby to the down above the Mermaid's Cavern, although a short cut in comparison with that along the cliff-top, was several miles in length, and as Mildred fled back along it now it seemed as though it would never end. Her eyes were blind to its beauties, or if they were observed, it was only as landmarks to calculate how much of the tedious way still stretched before her. She could not listen to aught that the affection of Mrs. Carey, or the honest sympathy of Robert Andrews, prompted each to say. Her thoughts had sped on with her heart, before her, to the cottage and its precious treasure she had left unguarded there, deeming that she herself was standing between it and him who coveted it. She felt like some out-mancœuvred chieftain, who, having set forth his forces to offer battle, learns that the foe has got between him and the fenceless town where the women and the children have been left, and by forced marches, hastens back, fearing unutterable things; and as, to his anxious eyes, it is something to see the town yet standing yonder, and not a mere heap of smoking ruins, so, when she first caught sight of her little home, tranquil and fair as ever, with the blue smoke from the kitchen chimney streaming in the wind (the pennant that shows that Commodore Comfort is aboard), and all its windows open to the sun, her white lips moved although they did not speak to

mortal ear, and with one long sigh she dismissed half her sorrow.

"I suppose Milly is in the kitchen, begging for plums," said Mildred to her friend, like one whose thoughts need endorsement; "cook always spoils the darling. Why do you not speak, Marion?"

"I was looking at that white thing on the roof; at the little window of the attic; there is somebody waving a handkerchief."

"Yes, so there is. That is Jane's bed-room; she is dressing, and the child is with her, doubtless; she is making a sign of welcome to us—that is all."

The mother's tremulous voice sorted ill with her confident words, and Mrs. Carey did not reply. As they drew nearer, they heard Jane calling, "Let me out—let me out, Ma'am; he has locked me in."

Without interrogating her further, the two women ran up stairs, and found the attic door locked against them. "He has taken the key away," sobbed the poor nursemaid from within, "and you must burst it in."

"Come up here, Robert Andrews," cried the lieutenant's wife. "Can you break this door open at once, without a crowbar?"

"Ees, Ma'am, I rather think I can," returned the coast-guard'sman, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Stand back, young ooman, within there, if *you* please."

Then raising his foot—that earliest battering-ram in the long roll of warlike instruments—he brought it down with accuracy upon the simple lock: away flew staple and screw heads, as though a petard had been applied to the spot, and behold little Jane, sitting on her own bed in tears, with twopence-halfpenny tight clasped in one hand, and her pocket-handkerchief in the other!

"I couldn't 'elp it, Ma'am," sobbed she; "indeed, indeed, I could not. Who would have thought of any narm in a horgin-grinder, with moving himages all round and round, and one of 'em a-playing on the pianna! And poor dear little Milly so pleased—I felt quite obligated to give him what I could spare; and I

ran up here for the money, leaving that precious darling dancing with delight, and he pretending to be so kind; and he must have followed me with his shoes off, for I never heerd nothin' till he locked the door upon me, and then went down and carried off that beautifullest child! Oh! 'ave you seen anything of her, and *can* you forgive me, though it ain't my fault, Ma'am, it ain't, it ain't indeed."

"When did the man take my child away, girl?" asked Mrs. Hepburn, hoarsely.

"Oh, nigh two hours ago, Ma'am. You see, cook she went down to Sandby after some s'rimps—or least-ways after George Brown, for it's no use telling fibs in a time like this—and I and little Milly, we was left quite alone; and while we was playing in the garden, who should come over the hill from Lucky Bay but this here man with the music, and little folks dancing in front of it—such a sight as I never before seed! And when he had inveigled me here, and locked me in, I watched him with the little darling on his shoulder, still so proud and pleased, taking the road across the downs to Westportown; but though I screamed and hollered, and squeeze my head out at the little window, and very nearly never got it back again, not a soul heerd me till I see you coming home to where there was no Milly."

The poor girl rocked herself in such an agony of distress as no reproaches could heighten. Mrs. Hepburn did not attempt to reproach her. "I was thanking God for *this*, Marion," whispered she, in hollow tones.

"God is never thanked in vain, Mildred," returned Mrs. Carey, gravely.—"Now, do not cry, Jane," added she, addressing the still sobbing girl, "but answer my questions truthfully and sensibly; thereby you will be doing what you can to repair the mischief which has happened. Did you ever, to your recollection, see this organ-man before?"

"Never, never, never!" answered the girl hysterically.

"You do not think it possible that it could even be

anybody you have seen before, in disguise ; not, for instance, the man who called here yesterday and spoke to me upon the lawn—that Mr. Stevens ? ”

“ I did not see the gentleman, not to remember him, Ma’am ; but this was a tall, big man, with a cruel face (though I didn’t think so at the time), and he had grey eyes and grizzled hair.”

“ That is enough,” said Mrs. Carey, thoughtfully.

“ Ay, and more than enough,” groaned the wretched mother. “ My Milly has been in his power these two hours.”

“ Yes, but he has the organ to carry, and the child as well,” reasoned the lieutenant’s wife. “ Do you, Robert, take the road to Westportown, and try to come up with this villain. Pursue him, no matter whither he has gone. Give my husband’s card to the chief constable, and tell him to spare no pains. Here is my purse. Ten precious minutes have been lost already.”

She had scarcely ceased to speak ere the willing giant was upon his way.

Mildred had sunk down on the floor, and, huddled together like some poor wretch who feels the teeth of the frost, there she sat shivering. She was neither weak nor witless ; but she saw in what had happened the corroboration of her worst suspicions ; and as the partridge cowers while the hawk is in the air, so she shrank beneath this unmistakable work of the relentless hand of her Aunt Grace. Mrs. Carey dared not leave her in such a plight (for the nurse-girl was worse than useless), nor, had she done so, could help have been obtained nearer than Lucky Bay. Nobody at Sandby would have done the bidding of the lieutenant’s wife, or even listened to her, so bitter was the feeling in the hamlet again the coast-guard and all connected with it. So the three sat where they were, only that ever and anon Mrs. Carey went to the little window, and looked forth in hopes of seeing the figure of Robert Andrews, or some messenger of his, upon the westward road ; but she saw nothing but the line of silver birches, thin and bowed, and the wild waste of down, and be-

yond, the ebbing sea and broadening sand. Once only she whispered to the girl, "Did Milly go with this man willingly?"

"Oh, yes, Ma'am, quite; and though of course it was the dancing figures which mainly pleased her, yet the poor dear child seemed to take a fancy to him from the first."

"That is very strange," mused Mrs. Carey.

After many a weary hour, the coast-guardsman returned. He had been unable to overtake the child-stealer; but the constables were on the alert, and the alarm had been given far and wide. The organ, with the figures in front of it, which had been so fatally attractive to the stolen girl, had been found in a ditch scarce half a mile away.

Mildred listened to what he had to say, without the blank despair upon her face taking any impress. She had expected no better news, and worse could scarce have been brought to her. Later in the evening, as they sat in the little parlour without lights, since Mrs. Carey averred that she could knit without them, and the gloom was dear to Mildred in her grief, there entered the truant cook. "Having a few hours' leisure," explained she, "she had imprudently taken a sail with Mr. Brown in the *Good Intent*, and the wind, though favouring them in going out, had been so contrary when coming back, that they had been delayed thus long; also, when they did land, she had received such news as had quite 'turned her,' and she had been obliged to——"

"We know all that," interrupted Mrs. Carey sharply, and making an imperious sign that she should leave the room. Then, after a few minutes, she herself arose, and going into the kitchen, said, "Your mistress thought you were about to speak just now of her poor child's being stolen; but if there is any new misfortune, tell it me. Heaven forbid that you have any bad tidings about Mr. Hepburn."

"No, Ma'am, not about him."

With a great sigh of relief, Mrs. Carey listened to the

narration of this domestic, discursive, egotistical, didactic, as it is the manner of her class to be, and more especially when they are conscious of being in disgrace, as though they would hide their error in a very mist of words.

Having heard all, she returned to her childless friend.

"Am I not right, dear Mildred, in supposing that of this bitter draught you have to drain, the bitterest drop is this, that the man Stevens, against whom you have been warned, and against whom Nature herself has warned you, should be the——"

"Yes, that my Milly should be in *his* clutches, above all men, that seems worst of all," cried the hapless mother. "No other could be half so cruel; no other ever frightened my lost darling by his very looks before."

"Ay, so I thought, my love. Now, Milly was not frightened at *this* man, who seemed to have a kind way with him, according to Jane's story. I thought that that had in it some seeds of hope; and now I have just heard——"

"What? what?" cried Mildred, clasping her feverish hands.

"Something that makes it quite impossible that the man who stole your Milly *could* be Stevens."

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE CUTTER.

UPON the same morning that the two ladies started on the expedition above described, Mr. Stevens took his departure for the same place in the coast-guard cutter, but several hours earlier. The cutter was on its return to Marmouth, and it was arranged by the lieutenant that his guest should be disembarked in Mermaid Bay, where the cavern was situated, as near the time of low tide as might be, there to remain until Mrs. Hepburn, or some other person in default of her, acquainted with the short cut homeward, should join him. To return to Lucky Bay, or even Sandby, by the cliff-top was a very long round (including the whole of the walk taken by Mr. Stevens and his victim the previous day); and the sea-passage, of course, was longer still. Moreover, the boat could seldom come near the shore in consequence of the reefs and rocks. The cutter, however, had a fair wind for her voyage, and sped along at a great pace, all on one side, as is the manner of such fast-sailing craft, and showing her very keel to the sun, as a flirt shows her ankle. Nor, I regret to say, was Mr. Stevens sea-sick. Upon that churning sea, with its patent double action of toss and roll, where most landsmen would have lost both heart and stomach, this gentleman sat as unmoved as though he possessed neither, and swept the land with a telescope lent him by the boatswain. Was it not well understood that he

was there to see the beauties of nature, the conformation of the chalk-cliffs, and the interesting habits of the sea-fowl? The crew had orders to give him the fullest information, and to afford him the best opportunities of observing whatever was most curious. Under these circumstances, they were rather surprised, as they approached the cliffs beneath Marmouth Beacon, which are notoriously the finest on the south coast, that Mr. Stevens seemed to take but little interest in them and, on the contrary, expressed a wish that the cutter should at that very point make a circuit round the Dutch-woman, an isolated rock of considerable size, but no great beauty.

True it was peopled by legions of sea-birds, whose proceedings were most varied and extraordinary; some of the whitest, like undergraduates in their surplices, just returned from chapel to an unfinished wine-party, seemed never to be able sufficiently to express their satisfaction, as Mr. Stevens and his friend drew near; others, on the contrary, with uplifted beak and wing, gave utterance to the most vigorous protests against such an infringement of the laws of trespass; the island was theirs, they contended, "theirs, theirs, theirs," and even the water within forty fathoms of the place was private property; "it was shameful, it was disgraceful, and no bird worthy of the name of *Larus Marinus* should put up with it for a moment." Some of these feathered sticklers for their rights so grievously exhausted themselves by their deprecatory statements, that they had to retire a while apart into certain holes of the rock for rest, or to partake, perhaps, of some marine medicament for the recovery of the voice, and in the meantime confined themselves to scrutinising the strangers with suspicion, and shaking their heads. The young people, who presented the appearance of solid thistle-down—little round balls of feathers—exhibited in their tremulous flappers, in their straining necks, and in their gaping mouths, such astonishment as only the young are capable of. The solemn guillemots sat all of a row upon the ledges, coming to no decision upon the matter

whatever, but like the *noblesse* in revolution time, gradually increased by new accessions to their conclave, until the space grew insufficient for them, and the original members were toppled off croaking feebly. As for the cormorants, they never ceased to take their "sensation headers," one after the other, like patriots who, perceiving their native soil is about to be violated by the foot of the foe, determine that there is nothing for it but suicide.

The foot of no foe, however, not even that of a bird-catcher, had ever been placed upon the brawny shoulders of the Dutchwoman; sheer and smooth she rose for many a yard from the deep blue sea, before the jutting ledges commenced which led like inverted stairs to the crown of the rock, upon which grew some scanty herbage. Ages ago, perhaps, ere the island had been divorced from the land, some four-footed creature might have pastured on it; but henceforth, while the world lasted, neither sheep nor kine would crop a mouthful there. The cliffs, too, were green with samphire, doomed to grow there unpickled to the end of time; otherwise, the mighty rock was without a trace of vegetation and in its inaccessible isolation looked unspeakably stern and lone.

"There's just as many birds, Sir, in those cliffs yonder, and they are as steep as this, and three times as high," observed the cockswain, who had had enough of the Dutchwoman, and did not much relish the voyage home being lengthened by any more *détours* to examine islands, of which their was quite an archipelago yet to come.

"I know it," replied Mr. Stevens quietly, "and we will keep in-shore for the future; but I can see the Beacon Cliffs very well from here, through your telescope."

"Do you see a very steep place, just under the Beacon, Sir—for I can't myself without the glass—where the chalk projects all the way down so as to form a sort of shoot?"

Mr. Stevens, as it so happened, was attentively re-

garding the very spot thus indicated, but he replied carelessly that all the cliffs seemed much alike to him.

"Nay, but the place I mean is steeper than most," persisted the cockswain, "and as it seems to me, who lost a friend there, like one great grave-stone. He was pushed over the top by a smuggler chap; a murdered man, Sir. If you'll hand me my glass, I'll find the place out for you in a moment—— Why, bless my soul, Sir, you've dropped it in the water; it's one of Dolland's best—a fifteen-guinea one; who the devil am I to look to for making it good?"

"To *me*," returned Mr. Stevens coolly, producing a well-stuffed leather purse. "It was exceedingly careless of me; but that cormorant came up so close to me from his long dive, that he startled me out of my senses. You shall be no loser, my man; and while I am paying my debts, let me add a couple of sovereigns, that my friends here may have the wherewithal to drink my health at Marmouth. I can scarcely make myself heard; what an infernal noise and clangour these birds do make!"

"Yes, Sir; I am sure if we could have made them quiet, we should have done it for you, a most liberal gentleman, I'm sure; but they do say the laughing-gulls only give themselves one hour's rest in the twenty-four, and, for my part, I've never had the luck to hit it; and they're just as noisy yonder on the mainland as they are here."

"Well, then, let's give 'em a wide berth for the present, for they have fairly dazed me with their clamour," replied the stranger; "the colony does not extend much beyond the Beacon Head, I believe."

"No, Sir; they're very partial in their breeding haunts. If I steer out to sea for the next five minutes, and keep well off the headland, you will be no more annoyed by their chattering. If it wasn't for their young uns, one would think that all gulls was females."

Whether the ear of Mr. Stevens was really so delicate as to suffer from the dissonance of sea-fowl or not, it

was clear that he was seriously annoyed by something. He lay back in the stern-sheets, frowning heavily, and without speaking, and ever and anon he shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked back through his fingers, as through a closed visor, at the long white line of cliffs the cutter was fast leaving behind it.

Thus he remained lost in his own meditations, and only dreamily conscious of where he was, or what people about him were saying, when suddenly the cockswain nudged him, "Do you see that speck of white, Sir, yonder?"

"No, no!" cried Mr. Stevens, leaping to his feet as though he were on dry land, and thereby nearly falling overboard; "it's nothing. Keep her out, I say.—I beg your pardon," added he, perceiving that they were by this time far out to sea; "you startled me from an ugly dream. What was it you were saying?"

"I merely wanted to draw your attention, Sir, to that white thing yonder gliding under the white cliff; you would scarcely think it to be a boat, I dare say, but it is one. That's Walter Dickson's craft, the cunning thief. It is almost impossible to see her, painted white as she is, when she's sailing between us and the chalk; and yet, since he caught sight of us, look you how she hugs the land! I'll wager she has been to Marmouth for no good. Nobody but a dare-devil chap like Dickson would venture so close in-shore, with such a sea on; you may take your oath he has contraband goods on board."

"Fire on her! sink her! run her down!" exclaimed Mr. Stevens excitedly. "Why do you let the villain escape?"

"Well, we must keep on the right side of the law, you see. Nobody ought to know that better than you, Sir, I fancy—asking your pardon for the liberty—for it strikes me you have worn the anchor buttons; one of ourselves, Sir, only a deal higher up the tree," added the cockswain, touching his cap.

"I will bear you harmless if you will stop that boat," replied the stranger passionately. "I will give

you fifty pounds if you catch her before she rounds the headland. Put the helm about, I say, and cut her off."

But the cockswain showed no inclination to obey. "Lor bless you, Sir, we'd be glad to do it for half the money, and indeed for nothing at all, since you would take the risk; but it ain't no manner of use. The *Saucy Sall* runs three feet to our two. She'll beat Sandby, with the wind against her, a'most as quick as we were coming with the ebb and all. And, by-the-bye, the tide is on the turn by this, and you will have less time, since we have steered out so far, for seeing the Mermaid's Cavern, than you had calculated upon. However, we'll land you just beyond the point there, and we shall come in view of the bay in a very few minutes. 'Tis the prettiest sight to be seen in all these parts, to my mind."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WAITING FOR THE PREY.

THE cockswain was right, although not particularly happy in his adjective. There is not a more glorious sight in all the coast-scenery of Britain than Mermaid Bay. There are grander scenes, perhaps scenes more beautiful, but none excel it for a combination of the beautiful and the grand. It cannot be viewed from above to any advantage, because the cliffs are sheer, except in one spot, where a zigzag path leads to the lofty down; but from the sea and from the beach it is beheld under circumstances equally favourable, though totally different in character. Approaching the bay from seaward, as in the present case, a crescent of chalk cliffs formed the background of a picture in which everything for that reason stood out as if in relief. Immense masses of outlying fragments still bid defiance to the waves, which furiously beat against them, and then, as if maddened by their resistance, thundered white-lipped on, and wore the cliff itself into a hundred caverns. At one point in particular it seemed as though the charging host of waves had used some strategy, whereby the precipice had been pierced in more than one place, and a junction of its watery foes had been effected far within it. Sooner or later, the tall cliff for many a yard was doomed, thus undermined, to fall; and on its face, the oblique layers and rows of flint—Nature's own hieroglyphic—shewed like Belshazzar's warning. Small

use it was to set those mighty warders, clothed in white, to break the advancing columns, when with every tide the enemy forced its way into the very heart of the citadel, and sapped the lessening pillars at their base, and tore the weakened walls.

The outlook from the extremity of this natural excavation was exceedingly beautiful. Left and right, the light streamed in under rugged archways, each making a framework for the picture of the sparkling bay. In the one, the waste of waters stretched unbroken till it met the sky; in the other, a line of jagged cliffs, about two furlongs from the land, rose sheer as an iceberg, and pierced, like it, in weird and fantastic forms. But what was to be seen within the cavern itself was even still more curious and beautiful, for the sun rays, broken and intersected by a thousand shadows, shone upon walls of rainbow hues, such as no colourist could rival; panellings of the brown barnacle, "picked out" with scarlet and yellow sponges, and dotted as the firmament with stars by innumerable sea-anemones of richest tint.* Amethyst and ruby, garnet and emerald, all were there, standing out like bosses on a shield; but instead of being a stone, each was a soft and yielding substance, fresh as a flower, and bright with a brightness that only life itself can

* A curious illustration of the blindness of our forefathers to natural beauties is exhibited in the following account of the sea-anemone, extracted from an old English magazine, and headed "Singular Animal Flower Found in 1764.—The inhabitants of St. Lucia have discovered an animal flower. In a cavern of that isle near the sea is a large basin, from 12 to 15 feet deep, the water of which is very brackish, and the bottom composed of rocks, from whence at all times proceed certain substances, which present at first sight beautiful flowers, of a bright shining colour, and pretty nearly resembling our marigolds, only that their tint is more lively. On examining this substance closely, there appears in the middle of the disc four brown filaments resembling spiders' legs, which move round a kind of yellow petal with a pretty brisk spontaneous motion. These legs reunite pincers to seize their prey; and the yellow petals immediately close to shut up that prey, so that it cannot escape. Under this appearance of a flower is a brown stalk, of the thickness of a raven's quill, and which appears to be the body of some animal." By the above, it would seem that only one hundred years ago was this creature discovered, whose extraordinary beauties the caves of ocean probably exhibited thousands of years ago as lavishly as now—but it was the pre-Gossean era.

yield. The ceiling of this treasure-house of nature was equally gorgeous ; but the floor was of softest sand, and doubtless often printed by the twinkling feet of the sea-fairies, after whom the place was named the "Mermaid's Cavern."

A few times only in the year, at very low spring-tides, were mortals admitted within this exquisite chamber, and then only for a very little while. Summer and winter, day and night, its beauties were hidden beneath the unconscious wave, to which, nevertheless, they owed their brightness and their bloom, but gladdening who shall say what eyes ?

Even on this occasion, the most opportune in all the year, there were but two hours between the time that the last reluctant wave left the silver fringe of the floor of the cave, and when the first notes of the great ocean organ should again begin to haunt its echoing walls ; and as the keel of the cutter clove the yielding sand to land its passenger—

"If you stay with the mermaids, Sir, beyond an hour and twenty minutes," was the cockswain's warning, "you will not leave their company without wet feet."

Then one leaped into the sea, and pushing the boat into deep water, climbed himself within it, and the sail filled once more, and lessened, and was lost, as the man Stevens watched it from the land.

With an evil glance up at the zigzag path, and a smothered oath at woman's tardiness, he sat down on the narrow beach, and drawing a letter from his pocket, read the contents slowly to himself. "She's wrong," he said, slapping the paper—"she's quite wrong there.—'When you have made sure of R.'—Well, I have done that. It cannot be but that he is dead. I myself saw his dying look ; an ugly sight, that haunts me still. I was a fool just now for showing—— It must have been what folks call conscience, I suppose ; but I *did* see it—saw it as plain as I see this letter. I must get rid of all such nonsense, for I have a worse job in hand than that of yesterday.—'When you have made sure of R., do not risk more at present. M. will be useful to us, and, indeed,

almost indispensable. I can only calm R. C. by promising that she shall still be his, as indeed she may be, if all has gone well. He is obstinate as a mule, and mad as the maddest, unless this lure is dangled before his eyes. Again I say do not risk more with M.; and as for the child, it will be invaluable. We will find means to bring it hither, and then its foolish mother will follow, I warrant, as a dam follows its lamb. Do not think me a milksop, nor that I forget my debts and yours; they will be all paid in time. But again I say, when you have made sure of R., risk nothing more at present.—“I do risk nothing,” soliloquised Gideon Carr impatiently. “This business I have now in hand is a certainty. Never again is it possible that such an opportunity will occur for killing *both* birds with one stone. Rupert Clyffard will then be left without kith or kin.—*Mad as the maddest*, she says.—I doubt it not; but I think I know a way to persuade even madmen to do what I will. If his fingers have joints in them, they shall write the words I dictate; or, at all events, sign his name in the right place on the parchment. How strange it seems that Grace and I, who have made so many sane folks appear mad, should now be striving to show this madman sane! I dare say Clement takes credit to himself for this, and calls it reparation. Poor superstitious fool! However, most of us have our hours of weakness, or at least our moments—as I had mine a while ago. It must have been some touch of—what do they call it? Remorse! ay, some mawkishness which I myself knew not was within me, that caused me to think I saw through that man’s glass—what?—pshaw! the thing must be a score of miles away by this time—half-way between the shingle and the foam; just as he said he would not have it be; of all fates, that the worst, he said—to welter on, unburied, in the boundless seas. I am sorry that I dropped that telescope. If the man *had* looked, what then? There was nothing for him to see; nothing for that Dickson neither. I was a fool; and now am I a fool to stand here on the open beach, and let yon fellows see that I care nothing for this Mermaid’s Cavern, which I have come so far to explore.”

He walked to the nearest opening, and looked in. "A dainty place for any lady of the *land*, not being a mermaid," muttered he with a grim smile, "to die in. What a soft silver couch ! What splendid hangings, and how rich the roof ! Somewhat low, i' faith, but else how could one see the jewels ? Would they were precious stones indeed, and that I alone knew of this Aladdin's cave ! Why, it would almost be worth while to adopt Clement's plan, who means, it seems, when he gets rich enough, to become pious, good—to make investments in the way of charity, which may repay him in the other world. Methinks the interest should be high indeed, where the security is so problematical.—Why does not this woman come ? She *will* come, I feel certain ; that fictitious message from her husband, reminding her not to fail, was an excellent thought ; she is a good wife, and she will come." He paused a little, then broke forth, as if in a passion, "Why should she have thrust herself between my ends and me ? Why have refused the man we chose for her ? Why married him, of all men in the world most hateful to us ? True, she is our niece, but for that very reason, she should have done our bidding. No, curse her ; she shall die ! Will she bring the child herself, I wonder, or will there be the nurse-maid ? Or will that woman, the lieutenant's wife, who is now staying at her house, come with her ?—that slow-speaking, demure hostess of mine, who, I can well see, entertains no favour for Mr. Stevens. I trust she may ; there is room for all three to drown in here—the tide will choke a dozen as easily as one. It is a question of five minutes, more or less, with anybody ; that is all. Mildred is tallest, and will be the survivor of her child and friend.—Ah ! what fine crabs are here ! Why, there's not a stone but roofs its tenant. That's what they talked of in the cutter, as we came along ; but I was thinking of—I mean I was playing the fool. Well, these side-long gentry will have some pretty pickings ere the day is out. How late their guests are, who will also be their suppers ! They will scarcely arrive here dryshod ; if they see me standing without, that will be

an excuse for them not to enter. They will merely beckon me up the cliff, and beckoning will not serve my turn; therefore, I shall stay within here.—Come, Mr. Crab, thou art so very large, that I have a desire to kill thee.”

This he said as one of the creatures stretched a mailed arm from under a huge rock (for with great rocks, bearded with trailing weed, the sand was strewn), and then withdrew it suddenly, as though its hard projecting eye had seen some danger. “Come, friend, come out of thy hole.”

He laid his strong hands on the rock, and strove with might and main to turn it over; but it did but move in its damp setting a hair's-breadth. Thus foiled in his first plan, and angry at being foiled, Gideon Carr made another attempt to gain his end. He knelt down, and scratched the sand away with both his hands, as a terrier scratches at the burrow of a rabbit; but when he had made a considerable hole, he desisted, “for,” muttered he, “she will take it for a grave, perchance, as indeed it looks like one. But, nevertheless, this crab will I have.” The hole was small; but he bared his brawny arm, and lying down within the hollow he had made, thrust it in to the very shoulder. The fingers reached that he sought, but as he grasped it, the crab in its turn, with its toothed claw, seized them like a rack and vice in one. For one instant, the man felt faint with agony, but rage soon conquered pain. “When I get out, my friend in armour,” muttered he, “although I shall have no time to take you home to boil, I will drive wedges into these claws of yours (a thing which I am told you do not like), and leave you to die, without supping like the rest upon certain dainty fare. Yes, you will come, notwithstanding that you struggle, and are so very large and strong;” and, indeed, huge as the creature was, the giant strength of Gideon Carr was dragging it forth, and had brought it almost to the very mouth of its dwelling, when suddenly the huge stone itself, undermined by the previous digging, and shaken by the present contest, toppled and fell forward—only a few inches, but within them was in-

cluded Gideon's naked wrist, on which it pressed like a new world on Atlas. Taken even at this frightful disadvantage, the man could still, perhaps, have wrenched out his maimed limb, but for the tenacity of the crab, which held on to him more resolutely than ever; his closed fist forming with the creature itself a sort of solid knot, which it was impossible to withdraw through the now narrowed aperture.

For the first time in his long life—in view at least of any material danger—the damps of fear gathered upon the brow of Gideon Carr. The frightful thought: What if this creature holds me till the tide comes up and drowns me! sped with a sharp agony through his brain. But straightway he became himself again; resolute, indomitable, calm. Without motion—for was not every moment now a loss of priceless strength?—he lay, calculating his chances. She would surely come, this Mildred for whom he had been waiting so long, but not until now, impatiently. He had felt quite certain of her coming, a minute ago or so, when he was free and out of all danger; then why should he doubt now? His own misadventure could not have altered *her* plans. No; she must needs come. He would set her to dig at the sand about his wrist, and then, when he was loose—yes, he would drown her still. He was not like Clement to cry, “Ye powers of good, if ye will help me now I will henceforth serve you.” Why was it not through this woman’s tardiness—curse her!—that he was now lying humbled and racked with pain? There was no bone, however, broken—he knew that; nothing to prevent his swimming away when the time came. But suppose she could not free him with all her efforts. Then he would hold her there, and they should drown together. Ay, but they should. There should be no lying stories of righteous retribution, forsooth, told about Gideon Carr. As he had lived, implacable, unbelieving, defiant, so would he—— But pshaw! why think of death? He should not, *could* not die! Were all his mighty plans for the future to be scattered by a paltry creature that was sold in the market for sixpence? Was Clyffe Hall to be

plucked from his grasp for ever, and tens of thousands of pounds to be lost—for if he did not get them, were they not lost?—and thirst for vengeance not to be slaked after all, but only whetted? For what was Raymond's death? He had written to Grace last night, "*The first step of the road you think so perilous has been taken. R. C. is gone.*"—The first step! And was it, could it be fated that he was not to take a second? Fated! that word, though unformed by his lips, sent a tremor throughout his frame. What had the fool Raymond meant in his last agony by saying that he saw the winding sheet bound high about him, the token of black doom immediately impending? Doubtless a last malicious effort to give him discomfort—that was all.—Ha! the rustling of a dress, and that of more than one! They are coming at last; the more the better, for the time is getting short and the——Gideon Carr did not conclude that thought, but, groaning, passed his disengaged arm for the second time across his forehead. It was no rustle of a dress which he had heard, but the echo of the first sibilating wave as it swept the sandy threshold of the Mermaid's Cavern; yes, that herald of the rising spring-tide had given its fatal warning; by that he knew, although he could not turn to see it, that the rim of beach was now no longer visible: then, for a moment, his iron heart gave way, and a shrill scream of terror broke from his labouring lungs. Such a sound—the inarticulate confession of defeat—they had never sent forth before, and even now he did not appeal to Heaven, nor yet to man.

The coast-guardsmen sitting lazily upon the cliff above was startled by it, and looked out sharply for the strange sea-bird that had uttered so harsh a note; and Mrs. Hepburn heard it on the down beyond, and asked her friend what sound it was, who told her it was but the west wind. If he had repeated it—but no voice could have framed a second time a cry so terrible, the concentrated anguish of a hopeless heart—perhaps help might have come. No woman could possibly have released him from his position, but the strong arm of Robert Andrews might have done it. Even as it was,

unaided, this imprisoned wretch, made frenzied by his peril, heaved up the rock by a tremendous effort some quarter of an inch, so that he saw the creature that was his jailer ; then back the mighty mass sank down, and pinioned him as closely as before.

And now, when he knew that his own efforts must be unavailing, a curious change came over him ; he had never—that is to say, within the last ten minutes, in which his whole life seemed to have been comprised—he had never felt so confident of rescue. Mildred would come, of course, and seeing the tide up, would conclude that an accident had occurred—that he had had a fit, or sprained an ankle, and would hasten at once, for what was getting her feet wet in comparison with saving a fellow-creature's life ? That was the way the woman would reason ; doubtless, she must be positively certain he was *there*. She must have seen the cutter that brought him pass by Sandby. Where else *could* he be ? And had not her husband told her—— Once more the guilty wretch shuddered from head to heel, for as his thoughts touched on Raymond, an icy hand was laid upon his limbs, as though a corpse had clasped them. Up, up it crept, and with it a stealthy sound. The tide had reached his feet, and higher yet. Though the floor of the cavern sloped upward, his very mouth was only a little higher than his feet as there he lay ; nay, the hollow of the sand which his own hands had dug, would cause him to drown more quickly. He had said that it looked like a grave, but never dreamt that his own form would fill it. He had jested of a few inches more or less making all the difference as to survivorship in such a case as this, and now, thus prostrate, he was doomed to drown sooner than any child of two years old. He remarked for the first time that the cavern was growing dark, and that a greenish tinge was mixed with what light there was ; and turning as well as he could, he saw the two approaches to the place half-filled with the rising tide, and only a jagged crescent of blue sky above it. Even while he looked, a tall, white-crested wave hissed in, and swept him to the very neck, and dashed his face with spray.

The freshness of the foam seemed to revive him ; and with a gleam of hope in his worn and anguished face, but with a cruel look upon it too, even though the coming pain was to be his own, he drew forth a clasp-knife from his pocket ; then dragging it open with his teeth, he began to saw the blade against the sinews of his captive wrist. He would escape still, ay, that he would. What was a hand more or less compared with life ? If he had but thought of this a little earlier ; but even now it was not too late. A mighty wave here whelmed him from foot to head. "Too late, too late !" it echoed, thundering in. "Too late, too late !" the screaming beach replied, dragged down by its return. Blinded by the salt water, Gideon could not find the place to aim at, but like an inexperienced woodman, cut and knocked the limb at random. Then another wave swept in, and roamed about the cave at leisure, and fell back upon him from the splendid roof and wall ; and then another, and another, thundering doom !

CHAPTER XXIX.

DESOLATE.

“How shall I tell Raymond when he comes home?” was the thought which now occupied poor Mildred’s mind, whenever it was not dwelling upon her lost Milly’s fate. “How shall I find words to let him know that we are desolate, nay, worse than desolate, for that is what we say when death has snatched our darlings only to give them to God!” The agony of the mother was the more insupportable, since she was forced to remain inactive—since nothing could be done, save what already had been done. She could not take coach to Clyffe, and cry to the wolfish woman there, “You have stolen my lamb.” Well convinced as she was that such was the case, she had not a particle of proof to support the accusation. It was useless to inform the police of the true state of the case, since that would enable them to take no further steps at present. When the actual stealer of the child should be tracked and secured, then, indeed, some blow might be struck at her who had set him on. But, at present, there was nothing for it but to wait and weep. Perhaps, when Raymond came, he might suggest some course of action, and yet the terror of having to tell him, “Our Milly is stolen,” so weighed down her soul that she scarce wished him back. It would have almost been a relief to her, in her lonely anguish, if he had sent a messenger from Marmouth to say, “My business keeps

me here a while." In the interim, perhaps, the robber might be captured, the child restored ; or Aunt Grace herself might relent. No, that was impossible. Even if she could have heard of her niece's agony, of the desolation she had wrought in hearth and heart, of the utter wreck of that humble little household, which she had effected as by the lightning's stroke, no touch of pity would have moved her ; of that Mildred was as sure as of her loss itself. Hope she felt still ; on which, indeed, alone she fed, through which alone she lived, and did not wither suddenly like a flower beneath the pall of the first snow—but not in her aunt's mercy. No, it was the thought of that hard, vengeful woman, which, more than all, made her dread her husband's coming. But when Raymond did not come, nor any messenger to tell her wherefore, and the third evening of his absence was thickening into night, then she began to feel that the uttermost depths of wretchedness had not been sounded even yet.

Terrible, indeed, are the weapons which God sometimes uses, or, in his inexplicable wisdom, suffers to be used against his creatures for their good. Inexhaustible is the armoury of his tremendous will. "The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away, blessed be his name," is a wise saying ; but let no human mourner venture to add—"He can now take away no more ; He has done His worst, or what seems to be His worst," when in truth all is good.

The arrows of His wrath have darkened our sun, but the night of our sorrow has still, perhaps, some moon of comfort. What, then, if the flight of His chastening darts continue yet, and darken *it* also, until all indeed is night ! The shield of resignation is sometimes raised in vain—or what seems in vain, to our poor, impatient, ignorant, fretful spirit, with its "How long, how long ?" and, smitten through and through, we lie prostrate in the dust, and still are smitten. Then, what was sorrow before, becomes almost joy by contrast with the more dismal present, as one who, from inner gloom looks forth on some late-traversed dusky way, and won-

ders how, with those glimmering stars above it, it ever could have seemed so dark.

Thus, no sooner did the shadow of her coming widowhood begin to steal over poor child-bereft Mildred, than all her former woe seemed almost light ; she no longer feared her husband's arrival, but waited for it eagerly, and at first hopefully ; then yearned for it as never bride longed for bridegroom ; then prayed for it, as for some blessed boon, almost beyond the power of Heaven to grant ; and still her husband came not. Mildred had heard from Mrs. Carey of the frightful fate of the man Stevens ; of how one of the Sandby fishermen had gone to the Mermaid's Cavern for crabs at the next low tide, and found the drowned man still imprisoned like another Milo by the pitiless stone, with his wrist half cut through, and the knife still clasped in his other hand. Directly she heard the news, a shudder had run through her frame, not upon his account alone who had thus perished, but because she also seemed to see a retribution in it for some crime at present undivulged—the finger of the Avenger pointing to another fatal catastrophe, in which Raymond's own life might be involved. And when, after a little, news arrived that he had never reached Marmouth, never got to the end of the journey begun with his dread companion, then, indeed—her husband murdered, and her helpless child in the power of her bitterest foe—it seemed that there was no new sorrow, as no joy, left in the world for Mildred. In vain Mrs. Carey besought her to leave her own desolate home, and remove to "Lucky Bay," out of reach of further hurt.

"No," answered she, with bitterness ; "lest my slain Raymond's spirit, wandering hither, should seek for me in vain ; or lest, when Grace deems it time to smite, that of my murdered Milly should return, and wail for me about the desolate home which is the only one she knew. While as to further hurt, my friend," continued she, "I would thank this aunt of mine to send and slay me, as the most welcome revenge she can take."

If friendship and genuine sympathy could have mitigated such woes as Mildred's, there were many that would

have gladly helped to bear them. Coastguard and smugglers for the first time united in a common object—in striving to bring her comfort. If the stealer of her child had fallen into the hands of either party, it would have gone hard with him indeed. The lieutenant was quite a changed man; all merriment and good-nature had left his eyes; like a knight-errant under a vow of vengeance, who abjures feast and tourney, and even puts in abeyance his fealty to his own sovereign lady, so did Lieutenant Carey forsake pipe and glass, and even his duty to his fair mistress the Revenue, and scoured the country night and day, and by land and sea, in Mrs. Hepburn's cause. Every yard of cliff, and particularly the Beacon Cliff, about which suspicions had been excited by Stevens's behaviour in the cutter, was examined by his own eyes, from his own boat; every foot of ground traversed by Raymond along the down-land on that fatal day was gone over with the carefulness of a sleuth-hound. His men, too, whose hearts had been won by Raymond's generosity and friendly bearing, worked in the same cause with a will; nor, as I have said, were the free-traders backward in showing their sympathy for the widowed and childless lady, although they evinced it in a very strange manner.

They would not permit the body of Stevens to lie by the side of their own dead in the little churchyard. In vain were they told that they had no right to charge the poor wretch with a crime which it was not even proved had been committed at all. In vain was the drowned man interred with all decency by clergyman and clerk. They dug him up, again and again, and cast his dishonoured limbs upon the wayside stones, until it was found necessary to remove them to a distant locality. Walter Dickson, whose boat had visited the Beacon Cliffs so immediately after Stevens had exhibited such an inexplicable dread of them, had come up himself to Pampas Cottage, and assured poor Mildred, with a profusion of the strongest expressions in his vocabulary, that it was out of possibility that any person could have been pushed over the cliff in that part, without leaving, to a

practised eye like his (to which, moreover, the place was known as well as the palm of his own hand), some trace of his fall. The evident desire of the man to give some comfort, so moved Mrs. Carey, who was present, that she rose up and shook both the freetrader's hands. "But you see it is no use, my man," she whispered, pointing to Mildred's hopeless face; "and even if you could give her hope, it would be a mistaken kindness. Nevertheless, I owe you a good turn for this, Walter Dickson, and will repay it you, if it should ever be in my power."

"Bless your kind honest face!" returned the smuggler with a curious sort of struggle in his own weather-beaten features. "If ever a coast-guardsmen does go to heaven, it will be your husband, who has got an angel for his wife, to show him the way. Perhaps it is as you say, and nothing as I can tell this poor lady can do her good; but if she was to take the good book to my old woman this evening, as she has often done afore, who is down and abed with the rheumatics, and nothing to think upon except the boys we lost at sea, older than this poor child (whom, please God, we shall see again) and therefore worse to part with, she might maybe forget for a little this sad trouble of her own in—— There, if she ain't gone to put on her bonnet and shawl already! We won't keep her from your company—that is, my old woman won't—not half an hour. She'll read, it is likely, just a chapter out of Job, something as teaches folk to put up with everything; although Job, I warrant—and saving your presence, Mrs. Carey—never knew what it was to be troubled with the Excise."

Whether it was the act of a good Catholic to read the sacred volume in the vulgar tongue to a female heretic, deservedly suffering from the rheumatics, was a question with which, I fear, Mildred Clyffard did not concern herself, although she was probably the first of her name who had ever committed mortal sin in that particular. Perhaps the Church forgave her in consideration of her ignorance and her good intentions. But certainly upon her return—which did not take place nearly so soon as Mr. Walter Dickson had specified—she did not

present the appearance of one who had incurred grave spiritual penalties. On the contrary, the consolation which she had administered she also seemed to have partaken of, and that so largely, that Mrs. Carey could not restrain an ejaculation of joyful surprise. "You have heard some good news, dear Mildred. I am sure you have," exclaimed she excitedly.

"I have nothing new to tell you, Marion, but only the corroboration of something you said the other day ; but which I, Heaven forgive me ! was too hard of heart to acknowledge. You told me then that God was never thanked in vain. Within these few minutes, I have found, my friend, that that is a true saying ; but please do not ask me any questions."

CHAPTER XXX.

AN UNEXPECTED INVITATION.

I CANNOT think that the postman, in this my district, W., who deals out birth and death, and happiness and misery, and ruin and competence, every morning of his life, save Sundays, to one or other of his fellow-creatures, does ever himself receive a letter ; otherwise, he could not surely go about his work with such methodical impassibility. I have watched him taking his morning round—the one which is the most big with fate, since little comes by the afternoon post except bills and invitations—I have often watched him, I say, distributing his momentous missives, and not a feature alters, whether he hands in the black-bordered envelope, which the fingers of the recipients do not venture to open, but hold it in their trembling grasp, while the lips murmur a silent prayer ; or the scented *billet-doux*, which the lover tears asunder in his haste, but the maiden hides in her bosom till she shall be alone. Nothing interests him except a registered letter, at which (notwithstanding that he must know it brings its welcome with it) he grumbles and repines, because he has to wait while we sign our name. At Christmas, though he must know that those enormous oblongs he brings are bills, he has not so much as an “I’m sorry for you ;” and an underlined “Immediate,” in red ink, which sets tingling all the blood in one’s body, does not afflict him nearly so much as a trifle of insufficient postage, without being reimbursed for which, he is

quite prepared to take the urgent document away again unopened: he doesn't care tuppence—yes, he *does* care exactly tuppence, and that's all. Upon Valentine's Day, indeed, he *may* show some signs of human sympathy, but that is a mere conventional and passing enthusiasm, and one which is incidental to his profession.

Now, the country postman is a very different person from this red and blue automaton of the town, and does not hold himself so high above human affairs. *Homo est*. He is a letter-carrier, and he considers nothing which letters contain to be beyond his sympathy, or out of his beat. If you want to get acquainted with a country neighbourhood, I know of no better plan than that of accompanying the postman in one of his morning rounds. What an interest he takes in the letter for Widow Chareall, the hard-working, honest soul, who comes out of the cottage and down to the garden gate with her bare arms, damp from the washing-tub, and her three chubby children hanging about her skirts, and who thinks it must be a mistake, for who, alack! is there left to write to her *now*, and, indeed, for the matter of that, who ever *did* write, for her poor dear John was no scholar. But the postman assures her that for her it is, and for no other, and lingers whilst she breaks the seal, and learns with genuine pleasure that a bit of money, it seems, is coming to her, about which John always used to talk with a certain vague hope.

Then away by the short cut through the park, where the deer do not raise their heads at the sound of his well-known footfall on the path, nor the hares at their morning toilet mistake for a moment his letter-wallet for a game-bag; and so by the range of stables to the back door of the Hall, where, if the footman is not in the way, the cook relieves him of the Hall bag, which she unlocks with her floury fingers, sets aside these for master, those for missus, and that on foreign paper for the eldest young lady with a grin, which our peripatetic friend reciprocates, for does he not know all about her engagement to the young soldier-officer in the Indies?

At the Manor Farm, again, he has a friendly chat

with the guidwife, whose husband is away at the cattle show in town, and who takes counsel with him as to the propriety of opening that letter with the Westportown postmark, which she feels certain is about the heifer, and ought to be seen to at once ; but finally decides to abide by his advice, and to "let it be," particularly since Mr. Leasehold is so very singular in the respect of "never thinking anything can be properly seen to except by hisself." He is not in such a hurry, is the country postman—although *between* his stoppages, mind you, he steps out with such vigour that conversation is rendered well-nigh impossible—but that he has a cheery word for all he meets ; and when he approaches the house of sorrow, such as Pampas Cottage, he finds time to remember to omit to wind his horn ; and when the lady of the house, in deepest mourning, herself steps forth to meet him, his voice has something in it which expresses his sympathy.

Thus it happened, at least, with the postman from Westportown—just recovered from his late ailment, and therefore perhaps more full of the milk of human kindness than usual, upon a certain morning which I have in my mind. Mr. Hepburn had stood by him upon a certain occasion when he had been wrongfully accused to his superiors by old Frumps, Lord Absentee's agent and bailiff, of having kept back some letter for twenty-four hours, in order to save himself trouble in the delivery thereof ; nor were Christmas boxes neglected at Pampas Cottage, nor was the offer of a glass of ale in inclement weather altogether unprecedented at that hospitable little house.

"I have two letters for you, Ma'am, this morning," observed he respectfully—"one on 'em franked." And if ever a face added, "And I trust it may bring you some comfort in your trouble, dear lady," it was the face of that genial postman. This good fellow was well aware that he was speaking to one whose husband had been mysteriously snatched away but a few days before, and whose child had been as strangely stolen from her ; but yet he deemed that a letter which was franked by a

nobleman, and bore a seal with a large coat of arms upon it, must needs contain consolation. The other missive had by no means an aristocratic appearance. In the pre-envelope epoch, it was not so easy to turn out a neat-looking note as now, and the individual who had folded this particular document had either possessed a very indifferent eye for rectangles, or had accomplished this matter ingeniously (but still not well) with his feet instead of his hands: it had a number of those dirty creases upon it, each of which, like a wrinkle on the human brow, tells of failure and disappointment; and when all had been done and undone of which foolscap is capable, the wafer had been evidently too lavishly moistened, and then hammered down with a penny. And yet, without even a glance at its more imposing companion, it was upon this homely epistle that the eye of Mrs. Hepburn rested with anxious welcome.

"Thank you," said she, and while the man still lingered—"thank you, and good-day;" but she never took her eyes off that straggling superscription, which might easily have been accomplished, like the folding, by a tolerably plastic foot, and which was spattered all over with ink to an extent inconceivable by those who have not witnessed the modern method of transferring ferns to dinner-doileys.

"It is the same handwriting," murmured she, "which warned me truly that—of my poor husband's fate. It can have no worse terrors for me now. What, then, if it offer some crumb of comfort? Perhaps about my Milly!"

Reader, have you ever had a letter in your hand directed to yourself, and only waiting the touch of your thumb and finger, which yet you dared not open? A poor farthing's worth of paper, with a little writing within it, which you have no more ventured to unfold without some preparation, thought or spoken, of the heart, than one of the Wandering Race would have ventured to break irreverently into the Holy of Holies. If so, you may remember that, notwithstanding your

faith in Heaven's mercy, you delayed that supreme moment again and again, and even endeavoured perhaps meanwhile to interest yourself in matters of little moment—in the children playing in the street, or in sparrows fighting for a straw. Thus was it with Mildred Hepburn, as, with that pregnant missive in her hand, she turned her attention to its fellow-letter, expecting to find in it, she knew not, cared not what, but something that might help her to put off for a few moments longer the plucking of the fruit of that dread knowledge-tree. But no sooner had her eyes lit upon the handwriting, than, with an inarticulate cry of hate and pain, she ran towards the house, exclaiming, "Marion, Marion!"

Mrs. Carey, who had been watching her from the window, was by her side in a moment.

"See!" exclaimed the wretched woman, "this is the writing of Grace Clyffard. Not content with gloating over the ruin she has wrought, she must needs write to tell me that it is her work. Yes, I tell you yes; you do not know her yet, nor what her revenge is like. It would not seem to her to be complete unless she wrote: 'Niece Mildred, I am even with you now. That was my hand which struck you, through those you loved.'"

"If she writes that," said Mrs. Carey, gravely, "she acknowledges a crime, and incurs the punishment."

"Ay, true," gasped Mildred. "Her cunning is as great as is her hate—she has let me know it, then, by some less direct means—that is all. Take it—take it: it chills my blood to touch the paper over which the snake has trailed! What is it that she says? What cruel gibes? What subtle stabs? What lies? But no, I care not what she says. She cannot harm me worse by wicked deeds; why, then, should I let her wound my ears with her barbed words!"

Mrs. Carey took the letter, opened it, and read it slowly to herself. "It is most audacious, barbarous, and base," groaned she. "She hints, I fear, that Milly is at Clyffe——"

"Then let me hear," interrupted Mildred, passionately. "Nay, I will be calm, dear Marion. Please to read it

out. One likes to know about one's dear ones—even how they die. What news is there of my little unprotected darling in the she-wolf's den?"

"Even she-wolves, as one reads, have sometimes been kind to babes," returned Mrs. Carey, soothingly. "I cannot think that any bearing the name of woman would harm a child like yours."

But Mildred only shook her head, and signed that she should read the letter out.

"NIECE MILDRED,—*I think that I have now no cause to owe you any grudge. However great may have been an insult in the first place, when the duel has been fought, the combatants, although in nowise friends, need be no longer enemies. They may even act together when their interests happen to be in common, which chances to be our own case. It is of importance to me that you should come at once to Clyffe. You will have nothing to fear in so doing, either from hate or love. My wrath is quite burned out; while, as for Rupert, he is ill, poor fellow, and needs a sick-nurse more than ever. If the ties of relationship and your own natural benevolence do not move you to accept this invitation, we are not without another little attraction, or what I believe to be such. But this shall be a secret till you come.*"

"Ay, she holds my child," groaned Mildred, as Marion ended; "and, as I have seen boys who have robbed an ousel's nest, carry home its young, and place them where the mother may hear their cries, and so herself be captured through her own loving instincts, so does this aunt of mine bait her fell trap for me with my very flesh and blood. Well, what then? I care not for myself what happens to me; and if I see my Milly once again——"

"Mildred Clyffard," interrupted Mrs. Carey, solemnly, "the thing which we do in our despair is rarely right. Moreover, there is scarcely anything the doing of which affects ourselves only, and no other. While you live and are free, your child has a friend to avenge, if not to

protect her, and to protect by the menace of avenging. This woman feels this, and therefore desires to get you into her power. She has made a mistake, as I think, in writing this letter. Her wrath has outrun her prudence, and carried her within reach of the law. There is much to explain in this, and which will have to be explained before judge and jury.—But what is that other letter which you hold in your hand ? ”

“ I had almost forgotten it,” answered Mildred, sighing, “ although, before I recognised Grace Clyffard’s hand, it seemed of urgent moment. It is from him who warned us of the man Stevens. You may read it also, if you please. There is nothing to be warned of now, and, alas, nothing to be told that is good tidings.”

“ But this is very strange,” said Mrs. Carey. “ Look you, the postmark is the same with that borne by the letter from your aunt. Why, *this* comes from Clyffe Hall likewise ! ”

Certainly, at the top of the page were scrolled those words above the date, which was the same as in Mrs. Clyffard’s communication. The rest of its contents were as follow :

“ Widowed, but not yet childless woman, my heart bleeds for you. I have done what I could hitherto, and I have failed. Nevertheless, let me at least preserve what is remaining to you. Mrs. Clyffard will presently ask you to come hither, relying on your love for your child, who, indeed, is here, safe and well. You will doubtless suspect a snair, as is only natural, but if it be a snair, it is for herself that Grace Clyffard has set it. Come hither, and fear not. The unknown friend who watches now over your child will then watch over you also. It is true I have warned you in vain, but, as you have bitterly learned, not without there having been need of warning. I beseech you, put faith in me this time. If, by cutting off my own hand, I could have saved your husband’s life, I would have done so, as God is my judge ; nor in this do I boast, since the murderer Stevens (for he was the murderer) would have

done as much, if he could, to have saved his worthless self. That man was Gideon Carr; the most dangerous of the foes who menace you and yours is therefore dead. You can count the rest upon three fingers—Grace, Clement Carr, and the man Cator. They are all here, but I am here also. Come, then, without fear.

“YOUR WELL-WISHER.”

With downcast head, and hands clasped as if in prayer, Mrs. Hepburn listened patiently, as penitent before a priest, only at the word “murderer” a shiver seized her limbs as takes the poplar when its leaves turn pale before the bitter east. When all was read, she took the letter from Mrs. Carey’s hand, and kissed it.

“I have faith in this man,” quoth she, “who has taken pity upon the widow and the fatherless.”

“What! and yet you have never seen him, nor can even guess who he is?” cried the lieutenant’s wife.

“Yes,” said Mildred firmly. “Is not that the very definition of true faith? This is no pretence or stratagem, I am sure. It never could have entered Grace’s heart, with all its cunning, to snare me thus. There is no approach to that for any good, not even in seeming.”

“But how strange, Mildred, that you can make no guess at who this friend may be; for kindness, not like that warmth which makes the quicksilver to mount the tube, unconscious of what sort of heat it be, whether from sun or fire, sets the heart at once inquiring from whence the genial glow proceeds that has so moved it. Friend recognises friend, no matter under what disguise he does his loving service. All love you here, dear Mildred, to the humblest. Have you, then, left none at Clyffe whom you can accuse of honest fealty?”

“No one more than another, dear Marion,” answered Mrs. Hepburn thoughtfully. “They were all respectful to me—nay, even kind; but they could not forget, I think, that I was this woman’s niece. They liked the Clyffard race, their natural lords—and especially their late master, Ralph—but not the interloping Carrs. No;

I cannot fix upon a single face in which so much of pity as this letter breathes has ever shown itself."

"Then I would not go to Clyffe, dear Mildred," exclaimed Mrs. Carey. "Remain here; or, still better, come to us. Set the law to work at once. Give this woman to know that if any harm comes to Milly, she herself will pay for it with her *life*. We do not live in times when murder goes unpunished, and far less dares, with its reeking hand, to point thus gibingly at those whom it has made desolate."

"Ah, that was how my own dear Raymond used to speak," cried Mildred with agitation. "You feel as he felt, indignant—nobly brave; but again, I say, You do not know this woman. She fears nothing—nothing—except that she should be thwarted in her purpose. I do not want revenge; I want my child, my Milly. If she would but say, 'There, take her, safe and well,' I would promise never to molest her more."

"So would not I, then," cried the lieutenant's wife with flushing cheeks. "What! forgive the wretch who set a man to slay my husband? No; had she twenty lives, she would need to look to them all. And if, in truth, she sat above the law, then *without* the law would I exact the penalty. I have no child, 'tis true, nor, as I hope, may I ever bear a child, if, having borne it, it should make me thus forgetful of my husband's wrongs—— Pardon me, Mildred; I have a home unshattered, a husband living—I know not what it is to be forlorn like you, or, perhaps, like you, I should sit down content with any shred of comfort that the destroyer might permit me to retain, and almost thankful that so much was left."

For a minute or so, over Mildred's face passed traces of some painful inward struggle, but presently it grew calm, and even smiling. "I love you for your frankness, Marion, quite as much as for your charity. Some day, perhaps—not now—you will know how much I thank you for it; how my heart yearns towards yours. Perhaps again, after this day and night, I shall never see you more; then God will thank you for me, and far

better. May it be long, indeed, ere death o'ershadow *your* dwelling, and may loss like mine be never known to your true heart. Nay, do not weep, dear Marion : it is your part, not mine, to play the comforter ; and that you have done so, He will not forget, who repays human love with love divine. May He suffer us, in heaven, if not here, to meet again."

"But what mean you, Mildred ? " murmured Mrs. Carey, through her tears. "Whither are you going ? "

"I start to-morrow morning, Marion, for Clyffe Hall."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE SLEEPING CASTLE.

THERE are few things that try the tender human heart so cruelly as the revisiting a home-scene from which death, or even absence, has taken away that which made it home; for however dear the external aspects of nature may be to us—and to some they are very dear—it is the association which they possess with our loves and friendships which, after all, forms their most sacred charm. The wood may wave as greenly, the fountain leap as brightly, and the lake reflect the peaceful sky as faithfully as of yore, but there is something missing to the inward eye, which mars their beauty more completely than if some drought had stripped the trees of every leaf, and robbed the stream of its song, and the mere of its silver flood. Nature seems cruel then.

Ye banks and braes o' bonnie Doon,
How can ye bloom so fresh and fair!
How *can* ye chant, ye little birds,
And I sae weary, fu' o' care!

is a thought that stabbed many a breast, before Burns so touchingly expressed it.

Ye'll break my heart, ye little birds,
That wanton through the flowery thorn;
Ye mind me o' departed joys,
Departed never to return.

Never—*never*. And yet the sun shines, as in the days

when it was wont to gladden us, nor has the treasury of heaven, at night, lost a single star. "From end to end," writes another poet, very different from the Ayrshire Ploughman, but equally susceptible of this divine regret—"from end to end of all the landscape underneath, I find no place that doth not breathe some gracious memory of my friend." But while he was *with* us, what had we to do with memories? All is changed to us, although the scene remains the same—lovely as ever, and ready to enchant new eyes; the heartless beauty smiles even upon *us*, who have found out her falsehood. Yet Nature is not false for being fair. It is we who are altered, and not she. It is spring with her again, as it was with us once—ah me, how long ago!—for she renews her youth-time yearly. The summer odours are as sweet now as then, and borne by the same bright clear airs, which drive the self-same seas of meadow-grass, although their shores may shift a little (as those of ocean do) from copse to cornfield. The cradles of fresh moss, with their coverlets of wild-flowers, invite us as of old—only we are no longer children. The shadows flicker and pass athwart the face of the pool, and fade away into light (like a good man's death), exactly as they were wont to do; but in the faithful depths, we see a wan, worn face, and the white head, where once the smile was mirrored, and the crown of flowers. The garden, to our eyes, has become a wilder-ness, nay, a very place of tombs, beneath each of which is buried a dead joy.

Thus was it with Mildred Clyffard, as her long lonely journey northwards drew to its close, and through the windows of the post-chaise she began to discern the well-remembered scenes amid which her love had ripened for him who was no longer with her. She had travelled all night, and at early dawn Ribble had shot up before her fair and green, with its great wall of limestone looking in the distance like a mural crown; Ribble, within which her troth had been first plighted. Then for many an hour her way lay through a land of rocks and streams, where every stone might have borne Raymond's name, and every runlet babbled it, so instinct was it with his

memory. The spring-time seemed to mock her with its joy. It was nearly midday when the wheels began to rattle over the uneven village street that led to the Hall gates. The last time they had done so, it was when she fled with her lover on the very eve of her threatened marriage with Rupert. Strange to say, she felt less terror in thus returning alone to brave the malice of her aunt, and the anger of him she had so slighted, than upon that occasion. She had then feared for Raymond, and listened for the clanging hoofs of the pursuer with a sinking heart; but now against him Grace Clyffard had done her worst, which was so bad that even she was glutted with it; while was not Mildred there to be her child's protector—preserver from she knew not what, fellow-guardian with she knew not whom—and did it not behove her above all things *not* to fear?

The post-chaise had drawn many a familiar face of child and woman to the doors of the hamlet, but the park itself, seen over the sunk fence, appeared unusually destitute of life for such an hour; no keeper with his gun, no labourer with axe in hand about the plantations, no blue-aproned bearer of vegetables from the kitchen-garden, no message-boy loitering on the path that led to the village—no external sign of life, in short, such as is ordinarily visible about a great country household, was there. The porter at the lodge, too, could not easily be roused; and while she waited, through the gilded iron gates the long avenue showed strangely desolate. As the cottage-door opened, she drew back mechanically, for she knew the man would start to recognise the face of runaway "Miss Mildred as was;" but she could hear his well-known voice in expostulation with the post-boy.

"You know, my man, it's no use your bringing anybody here at this time," quoth Giles the porter. "Why can't you let a poor devil, who scarcely remembers what a night's rest is like, take a little sleep?"

"It is a lady, and I did not like to tell her," replied the other in a tone so low that Mildred could scarcely catch the words.

"Nay," grinned Giles, "but that only makes it worse. The master will have no such folk within his doors."

"Ay, but she comes to visit Mistress Clyffard."

In a moment the gates were thrown back, and through her veil Mildred could see the porter drawn up in the most uncomfortable of the attitudes of respect, and shading his eyes with his hand, as though the glory of the exalted personage to whom he was doing honour was almost too great to look upon.

The deer, that had been wont to keep at a considerable distance from the avenue, were now feeding close beside it, and cantered nimbly off as the chaise rattled by; while the rooks, more easily moved than of yore, rose in a single cloud from the swinging branches, and like a household roused by night-alarm, inquired of one another hoarsely what was wrong; whereupon some answered "Thieves!" and some cried "Fire!" and others (who seemed half asleep) murmured "Both! Both!" As the visitor drew nearer to the house itself, the peacock on the terrace began to scream; but Mildred remarked to herself how strange it was that, save the deep bay of the bloodhounds, not a note came from the distant kennel where the foxhounds lay, and from whence such a tumult had been wont of old to issue in the daytime at the echo of hoofs from the courtyard. No sound of human tongue was heard, no cheerful noises such as the morning brings to every dwelling; no human face came to the blinded windows of the upper floors, and those beside the door were shuttered close.

"Is there death here?" asked Mildred of the post-boy, letting down the glass with a trembling hand, and thinking with agony of a small white face, growing pointed and thin, and cold little hands, which she had not been in time even to put crosswise over the sinless breast. "Speak, man, and tell me the whole truth."

"Well, Ma'am," returned the young fellow, mitigating the Craven dialect for her benefit as well as he was able; "it's what I can't incense you about in a crack, but I'll not lee to ye. The master, you see, he's odd, and will have nothing done in the daytime. All the folks here

gets up at eve, and goes to bed in the morning. It's mackly that they're all asleep, and will give me time to tell the tale before they answer the bell. Some folks hes lile brains, and some's an outshut;* and Mistress Clyffard, she has brains for hersel as well as for Squire Rupert."

"But he must be stark-staring mad," exclaimed Mildred involuntarily, "thus habitually to turn night into day."

"You've about hit the sticklebutt, Ma'am; but 'mad's' a hard word, and a bad one" (here he looked cautiously around him) "to speak of hereabouts. Besides, we can't be nesh † when there's so much gear going. It would not be wise in the mistress to lock him up like the rest of 'em. Better hev a bairn wi' a mucky faace than wesh its noas off."

"Then this poor gentleman is only suffered to be at large to serve the purposes of another?"

"Nay, Ma'am," returned the post-boy apprehensively; "I know nothing mysel—I only tell what I have been told; and if the great folk here should come to learn it, they would tak uncoutn ‡ at poor Toby Drayson."

"But what a dreadful hypocrisy, what an acted lie must all things here——"

"Tush, Ma'am, dinna flite," § interrupted the other; "if leeing were choking, thear'd be hard gasping everywhere. And again, I say, speak not o' what I told ye. Ye braad o' me, || I see, and have an honest kindly heart, or I should never ha' spoken.—But what name shall I say, for here is somebody coming at last."

"Mrs. Raymond Clyffard."

"Saints and soldiers! What, are ye braad o' *them*? Then I wish I'd never spoken. But folk ses out when ther i' drink; and indeed, indeed, Ma'am, I made too free with the liquor this cold morning."

"Do not fear," returned Mildred, smiling. "I am

* An outbuilding, an additional place of stowage for that article.

† Squeamish.

‡ Take offence.

§ Scold.

|| You are of the same breed, or character, as myself.

not of their race, although of their name ; nor am I and Mrs. Clyffard such friends, although we are relatives."

"Then, for any sake," returned the man confidentially, "let us shog back again to Lancaster, while yet we may. Wae worth ye, if ye stay here, and be an unfriend of the mistress. Come; for your kind face, and the trouble in it, I will take ye back, and risk all—ay, though there's an ill-looking devil on the bridge yonder—I wonder where *he* sprung from?—loitering there for no good, and as much as to say, 'What we have stolen, that we keep.' Say the word, and I'll ride him down like muck. Let him take care of his taahs."*

"Thank you much," returned Mildred, gratefully; "but I have come hither of my own will, and am not afraid to stay here." Nevertheless, as she looked back in the direction indicated by her new friend, and beheld the gaunt form of the man Cator standing upon the narrow way, as though indeed to forbid her egress, she felt that she had need of all her courage.

The next moment the door was opened by Mrs. Clyffard.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A WEEK'S REPRIEVE.

"You have come at last, niece; I have waited for you long," said the Lady of Clyffe, letting fall her ice-cold syllables one by one, like drops from a petrifying spring. "If I do not take your hand, it is not because I am not glad to see you."

Resolute, severe, unbending as ever was Grace Clyffard, in voice and gesture; but her fair features had suffered change. The brow was no longer smooth, and the lithe form had lost its rounded grace. Trouble, and what is worse than trouble, the anxiety of guilt—the dread solicitude of one who drives a chariot on a city wall, unfenced on either side, and dares not for his life look right or left, but always to his plunging steeds—had worn at last her wondrous youth away. Moreover, she seemed to take no pains to keep it; her attire was loose, and her fine hair unbraided, although it was plain she had not been roused from her bed, as other inhabitants of the Hall had been by this time. And indeed, Grace Clyffard, it was said, now never slept. Perhaps, had Ralph been alive, she would have contrived to retain her marvellous beauty, but now, as though aware it was of little use to her, she neglected it, unwomanly in that, as in all else. A look of scorn which had sat upon her, when she first appeared, faded away as she gazed in Mildred's face, and marked its calm resolve. Twice had her niece essayed to speak, and twice had failed, but it was easy to observe

that her inability did not proceed from fear. Even Tobias Drayson, who was himself by no means free from apprehensions, could see that, as, after lifting the luggage into the Hall, he threw into his farewell scrape at the door a more genuine sympathy than could have been expressed from all the bows that Lord Chesterfield ever made in his life.

"Stay one moment," cried Mildred to this friend of three hours' standing, who was about to leave her in the keeping of her mortal foe, "there may have been some mistake here after all.—Mrs. Clyffard, where is my child?"

"She is in Lucy Cator's charge—a servant new to you, I think, but very faithful. Must you needs see her now?"

"Here, and at once!" returned Mildred resolutely. "I will not stir, except to leave this house, unless I see her; unless I hold her in my hands."

The hideous thought that had already pierced the mother's breast was again at work; she dreaded lest this fiendish woman, keeping her promise to the ear, might presently give to her orphaned arms her Milly—dead.

"Your child is safe and well enough," returned Mrs. Clyffard with a sneer; "this bell will bring her in three minutes. There!" She rang it. "But do not look so haggard, niece, for be sure I did not ask you to Clyffe Hall to play the mourner."

The cruel shaft sped not home; the mother had no ears save for the sounds she hungered for—the echo of a tiny footfall, and the babble of a baby tongue. Tobias, too, with head aside, awaited them with not a little interest; and presently they came.

"Run, then—run to mamma," cried a woman's voice, not unkindly, and then was heard the pompous stagger of an infant's feet, and the crow that bespeaks pedestrian confidence; and like an arrow from the bow, forth darted Mildred, and caught her child up as it strained, like hound in leash, to meet her from its nurse's hand, and hugged it to her breast, and kissed and fondled it, and rocked it to and fro, with murmurous inarticulate joy.

No sooner had the first gush of grateful happiness passed away, than her eye glanced towards the door. It was closed; Tobias was standing by it no longer, and there was a dull sound of wheels.

"It will be better both for you, niece, and for your child," said Mrs. Clyffard, in her sibilant voice, "not to think any more of what I read in your mind just now. You have foiled me once, it is true, but once with me is enough."

Mildred trembled.

"You fear," continued Mrs. Clyffard triumphantly, but speaking still so low that not a sound reached the nurse's ear; "you fear, and you are wise. You dare not risk so great a stake as that" (she pointed to the infant clutching in blind love its mother's cheek) "upon a losing game. Mind, I would not have you marry Nephew Rupert."

"*Marry him!*" That was all Mildred said; but had she cried, "Thou fiend and murderess, with hands yet dripping from my husband's blood, how darest thou speak to me of marriage?" she could not have expressed more hate and loathing, than did her shrinking form, that seemed to fear pollution from the woman's touch, and poison from the very air she breathed in common with her. "*Marry him!*"

"No, niece; that is no longer necessary. But see you speak him fair, and promise what he asks for. There is no harm in humouring a madman. Thanks to you, Rupert has never been himself since when you broke your faith with him and me, and fled—as did your false mother before you—from kith and kin, to link yourself with their sworn enemy. I cannot quench the anger of my eyes the while I speak of it, but I have forgiven you this, and Rupert has forgotten it. He deems that every morrow is his marriage morn; and therefore, that the night may pass the quicker with him than if, on a sleepless pillow, he lay longing for his gipsy bride, he turns it into day—hunts, shoots, and fishes by moonlight, or by torchlight if there be no moon, and makes the name of the mad Clyffard a wonder and a jest the country

through. And he *is* mad, too ; so mad, niece, that if I did but tell him ‘That is Mildred’s child, she that is widow of thy brother,’ he would pluck her from thine arms, and dash her brains out on yonder court-yard stones ; and yet the law would hold him harmless. But the law stirs not of itself ; and if I have his name set to a certain parchment, written out and ready for his signing more than two years back, and which he would have signed upon the very day on which he called you his—you ungrateful girl—I say that even now, should he but sign it, there being no greedy heirs to wrangle with me, and dispute my rights, the thing would hold ; and all this goodly heritage, on which I have fixed my eyes these many years, and have yearned after as you—weak fool—have yearned after that babe these ten days, shall henceforth be mine—mine—mine ! ”

Grace Clyffard clasped her hands as though she were invoking a blessing from High Heaven upon her sinful soul. So rapt in greed, that for a moment she forgot the very presence of her niece. Then suddenly she swooped upon her with, “You dare not thwart me, Mildred ; you dare not come between me and such a prize ! If loss of all you love—who have already lost so much, and can afford to lose so ill—has terror for you, play me not false again ! When will you see Rupert ? ”

“Alas, Aunt Grace, I fear——”

“When—*when*, I say ? ” exclaimed the pitiless woman, not stormfully, as the winds beat and the rains fall, but fiercely, as the hailstones rattle and hiss. “To-day, to-morrow ? A week hence, if you will have it so ; but when once named, see you depart not from the time. I will not brook postponement for an hour.”

“Then I will see him *now*,” quoth Mildred resolutely. “Here, at once : I am ready. Let him come.”

“Fool, would you have him rend you limb from limb, you and the child as well ? You know not what you ask. No, nor yet to-morrow. Those sunken cheeks must be plumped out, those eyes harbour no tears, those mournful garments be exchanged for others befitting one on the threshold of her bridal. A week hence it shall be. You

hear me, girl? I do not mince my words; but do you heed? I will not take your silence for consent. Speak—speak, I say. What! you are contumacious?—Lucy, take her child!”

As the woman stepped forward to obey her mistress, Mildred cried with passion, “I hear, I heed. I will do all you ask, if I have still my child; without her, nothing. Rupert and you may rend me limb from limb, as you have said, but I will not be parted from my child!”

“Good,” returned Grace. “For a week, then, you shall have her to yourself; and then after that, if the parchment be but signed, shall take her whither you will; if *not*, then you will not be much together, you and she. Do you understand me, Mildred?”

“Yes, we shall be parted like my husband and myself,” returned Mildred hoarsely. “Let me go hence to my chamber; I cannot bear to look upon your wicked face.”

“You are no flatterer, niece; but that does not affect me. My presence shall not vex you longer now, nor any more, unless your own conduct calls for it.—Lucy, shew Mrs. Raymond Clyffard to her room; and see you never leave her night nor day, as I have already charged you.—Remember, a week hence, and you meet Rupert Clyffard as his betrothed bride. Have I your word, Niece Mildred?”

“You have, Aunt Grace,” answered Mildred resolutely.

For is not a “week hence” a precious boon, to be rejected by no human soul in present peril, and least of all by a woman? A very eternity of comfort—a space wherein a score of unlooked-for buds of hope have time to spring up, any one of which may blossom into the flower safety?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A GENTLE JAILER.

LUCY CATOR, the woman who was appointed to be Mildred's attendant, and also her jailer, was one of those persons who are always middle-aged. Like the wicked dwarf in the fairy tales (although she was by no means a dwarf), she looked as though she had been born into the world very grey and wrinkled, and yet with a beady brightness about her eyes that seemed to promise an eternal youth. If it was impossible to imagine her a child, it was equally hard to picture her bowed down and decrepit with age. Like the horse that we buy at fourteen, and work for six years, and boast (and believe our boast) that he is as young and as strong as ever, Lucy Cator looked capable of doing domestic service for several generations yet to come : the most prudent mother would have hired her to preside over a nursery of young children, with no fear that she would soon (alas, alas, for the poor human, who has no paddock to take her ease in, and to whom even the knackers afford no happy release, when past work!) become "unequal to the situation." She had been only recently taken into Mrs. Clyffard's service, but she came of a stock upon whom that lady could rely. Her brother William had been year by year establishing himself in the good graces of the Lady of Clyffe, and since Gideon's death, he had grown to be something more than a servant. She could count upon him to execute

projects from the consequences of which Clement shrank in fear ; and although he was much wanted at the Dene, where, indeed, her brother could scarcely be induced to stay without him, she had retained him at Clyffe Hall of late for her own reasons.

Much of this Mildred guessed, and on that account, as well as from the odious relation of domestic spy in which she stood to herself, was inclined to regard her new acquaintance with great disfavour. But there was one thing which much mitigated this feeling—Milly was fond of Lucy. With that strange waywardness that belongs to infancy, and which might at times almost lead a mother to imagine that her own child was a changeling, no sooner had the three arrived in the large chamber allotted to their use, than Milly stretched out her little arms to her new nurse. Lucy stood with her hands by her side, not offering to take her from her natural protector, and still the child struggled towards her, as though it would have said, “Now, let me go to her, now do ; for though I am well aware you are my mother, and the person to cling to in the presence of an ogress, such as she who has (I am delighted to see) just taken herself off, yet I do owe this singular-looking female an apology for my apparent desertion of her. You have no idea how civil she has been to me while you have been away ; I really must go to her.” A flush of wounded pride involuntarily stole upon the mother’s cheek ; but she stepped forward, and gave her child to Lucy, saying, “You have been very kind to her, I see ; may God reward you for it !”

For an instant the whole face of the grey woman was lit up with pleasure, as suddenly as a gas-jet which one turns the wrong way before one turns it out—then once more it became as hard and wrinkled as a winter’s road. “Mrs. Clyffard bade me treat the child with every care, Ma’am,” returned she coldly. “That was to be one of my chief duties.”

“And what is expected of you else,” inquired Mildred, her aversion renewed with this reply, “beside this hired care ?”

"I am to wait upon yourself, Ma'am," returned the other, her face quite buried in the child, who laughed and gurgled at her kisses like the rich wine escaping from the flask, and babbling of the vintage feast whereof it was the pride a score of years ago.

"That 'waiting' means watching, does it not—means playing the spy upon me night and day?"

"You heard what Mrs. Clyffard said, Ma'am," replied the other quietly. She spoke with a humility that disarmed her interlocutor. It could not have been in the letter of her task that she should behave with such respect and gentleness. Besides, what could *she* know of the wrongs that had been suffered at Grace Clyffard's hands? No! It was manifestly unfair to treat this woman, who was only doing her duty—and that with delicacy and feeling—as one responsible for the actions of her mistress.

"You are right, Lucy, and I am wrong," said Mildred. "I ask your pardon for my angry words. If you knew how cruelly I and mine have been treated, you would make all wance for me, I am sure."

Lucy bowed her head, but without speaking.

"I want, however, to know exactly the position in which I am. You are to be my inseparable companion. But am I to be also kept an in-door prisoner?"

"You may walk about the park, wherever you please, Madam—that is, if I am with you; but not upon the village side of it, or in the avenue."

"Your orders are precise enough," said Mildred bitterly. "Now tell me—I have a foolish fancy for visiting Ribble Cave to-morrow—do they preclude it?"

"No, Madam, they do not."

It was well for Mildred that as this answer came her face was turned away from her whom she addressed, for at those words her features changed from shrinking pale suspense to the full rose of exultation. Nor was it at once that she could trust herself, to yoke her rapturous thought with sober words.

"Lucy! I do not know if you have ever loved and lost, as I have done; but if so, when I tell you in that cave

fell the first whisper of love upon my ear from lips that now are dumb, you will understand the prayer I am about to make to you to grant it ; if not, perchance because I am of your own sex and friendless, you will indulge me in what is at worst a harmless whim. I wish to visit Ribble Cave *alone*. To me and to my child, that place is hallowed ; you would not surely break in upon your sister at the altar-steps, and mar her prayers ? ”

The woman’s face melted at this appeal like snow before the sun, then froze again as quickly as before.

“ There is no outlet to the cave, save one,” continued Mildred ; “ and therefore you will not neglect your duty by remaining at the entrance ; you will have us both secure.”

Lucy shook her head. “ Let us talk of something else, Madam, if we must needs talk ; but you cannot but be weary with your long night’s travel. Here is refreshment, and when you have taken it, lie down upon your bed and sleep, as all at Clyffe are sleeping now.”

“ Not until you have promised what I asked,” pleaded Mildred passionately. “ It is a small thing perhaps in your eyes ; but in mine—ah, you cannot guess what value I set upon it ! Come, promise me, and I shall sleep in peace.”

“ No, Madam, I cannot,” said Lucy gravely ; “ your very earnestness forbids me to say ‘ Yes.’ You will *not* be safe without my presence. From Ribble Cave there is an outlet besides the one of which you speak.”

So flushed was Mildred with her recent joy, that she did not guess the woman’s meaning, notwithstanding her grave tone, for the heart, when hopeful, is as disinclined as childhood’s self to contemplate the dreadful void of death. “ What outlet, Lucy ? ” Then when she did not answer : “ Do you think that I would drown myself, and so escape ? Having just found my child, would leave her motherless once more ? Or drown her also ; whereby her innocent soul would flee to heaven, while my own would suffer separation from her—keenest pang of hell—for ever ? Do you think *that*, Lucy ? ”

“ I did think so, dear Madam ; but I do not now.

I see that I may promise what you ask with safety. Now, pray, eat a little and then to bed."

"I cannot eat, good Lucy; I am too happy. This child is precious food to me, and also satisfies my soul with rest; but I will lay me down that you may sleep. What doors are these, for I do not know this room?"

"The nearest is the one by which we entered, opening upon the little gallery that runs by Mrs. Clyffard's chamber; and this upon the stairs that leads to the clock tower and the western postern."

"But is not that a third door beside your bed-head?"

"Yes, Madam, and locked on the inside, as all the others are. It leads like the first."

"But not immediately?" said Mildred with apprehension. "There must be a room between."

"There is a bed-room, Madam."

"And is it occupied? Who sleeps there?"

"My brother, Madam—William Cator."

In her new-found child, in the seeming kindness of her attendant, and in the budding of a secret hope that was to bloom upon the morrow, Mildred had almost forgotten that she was a prisoner; but at the hated name of that unscrupulous servant of the Carrs, she awoke at once, as from a baseless dream, to the full consciousness of her unprotected state, and of the dangers that were threatening her. "Give me the keys, and let me put them beneath my pillow, woman!" cried she harshly. Then obstinately refusing to unrobe, she lay down outside the bed-clothes, clutching her child to her bosom, while her sleepless eyes wandered from door to door.

Hour after hour went by in perfect silence, save for the singing of the birds, which had not as yet conformed themselves to the inverted habits of Clyffe Hall, ere Lucy's deep-drawn breathing convinced Mildred that her jailer was asleep. Milly had long been rapt in soundest slumber. If she could only rise without awakening either, and reach the postern with her precious charge, while yet no human creature was astir!—once in the village, she would be safe enough, or what seemed safe by comparison with such a neigh-

bour as this woman's brother. The postern had no lock, she knew, but only bar and chain, which she could unfasten. Softly she arose with key in hand, and keeping her eyes fixed upon Lucy, opened the second door without noise, then lifting up the sleeping child, stole forth as silent as a ghost, and flitted down the stair.

Not five minutes had elapsed ere she returned, and pale and cautious as before, stole into bed again with beating heart. In her hand she held a slip of paper, which she had found, newly fastened—for the wafer was still wet—upon the postern.

“On your life, do not open this door. You will escape, sweete lady, but not by such means. I am watching over you. Having had faith in me thus far, is it worth while to mistrust me now?”

“YOUR WELL-WISHER AS BEFORE.

“Destroy this note at once.”

This Mildred read and re-read until every word was hers; then tore the paper into a thousand fragments, and placed it in her bosom. Like a charm, it stilled its throbbings; and presently the healer sleep drew down her eyelids with his viewless hand, and smoothed the care from off her troubled face.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A BROKEN NIGHT

Nor until the weary fall asleep and wake again after an insufficient amount of repose, are they fully conscious of the extremity of their past fatigue. Ere they give way to sleep, it seems to them that they are tired, but not exhausted ; but when something arouses them after a few hours, then they know, by harsh evidence, how near their overtasked strength must have been to collapse. The muscles are stiff, the limbs powerless, the eyelids heavy as lead, the brain torpid, and only with pain and difficulty quickened to thought. Our whole being piteously, and yet drowsily, demands to be let alone in that antechamber alike of death and life—repose—a little longer. “A little more sleep, a little more slumber, a little more folding of the hands to sleep.” When, under such circumstances, some importunate sound compels our reluctant attention, we are long before we can trace it to its true origin ; and before we wake, it sometimes suggests dreams in which we seem to live a lifetime. Thus Mildred Clyffard, dead to every sense save that her lost child was folded in her arms, lay, dreamless as the dead, for hours, and then began to know that she was prisoner in an enchanted castle, ruled over by the wicked and malignant Grace, assisted by certain evil demons—Gideon Carr, to wit, and Clement, and William Cator ; but yet

she had friends outside, and, in particular, Lieutenant Carey (always in complete armour, and upon a milk-white steed), who was encamped (by himself) without the walls, and passing his time very agreeably, as it seemed, in summoning the garrison by blast of trumpet to surrender to his clemency. Nor was the garrison backward in the trumpeting business (without which, by-the-bye, it is the opinion of the present writer that the chivalric period of this world's history would have ceased much sooner than it did), but sounded onsets, and recalls, parleys, fanfaronades, &c., with neat finish and admirable execution. Poor Mildred's prescient spirit sighed for the extension of Mr. Bass's bill to shalms and trumpets, but still the brazen clamour continued until it fairly woke her. It was deep night, but through the windows, which looked down on the courtyard, flashed a lurid glare.

"Fire!" was the sudden thought that dragged her by the strong arm of terror from the bed, and made her put aside the blind with hasty fingers, encumbered by her babe. A strange sight met her gaze. The space was thronged with men and horses, shown by the light of flaring pine-torches; the strife of tongues, the clang of spurs and hoofs, filled the dark air with weird unnatural din; and while she looked, the hounds came trotting from their kennel, and the crack of whips broke forth, and then again the sharp short summons of the horn.

"Do not be alarmed, dear Madam," cried Lucy from her bed; "the master is only setting forth to hunt. I suppose it seems strange enough to you, though we at Clyffe are getting quite used to turning night into day."

Strange, yes, strange indeed, for though the sights and sounds were in themselves not unfamiliar to Mildred, she scarcely recognised them under the changed circumstances. It almost seemed as though these persons were engaged in some unhallowed rite, some impious attempt to turn God's gift of darkness from its proper use and purpose. In such a parody of the blessed morn, appeared something sacrilegious; so ill did the borrowed light depict the dawn; so dissonant the noises that strove in vain

to wake the sleeping world. The air was dumb that should have been alive with Nature's waking sounds, though what sounds were made, she echoed like one wonder-stricken ; so that the noise and clangour of the scene itself were ceaseless, although islanded in a boundless sea of silence ; and though the torches flared and blazed, and every hoof drew fire from the stone, a mighty belt of darkness encompassed all.

"And is this scene enacted every night ?" asked Mildred, half to herself.

"Yes, Madam, every night, far into spring, and long after the other pack at Kendal has ceased to hunt. At first, the novelty of the thing attracted many folk ; but now the master hunts alone, save for his own people. Wet or dry is all the same to him, and even for frost he cares not. I am told that it is a grewsome sight to see his reckless riding—he that was once such a bookworm, and averse to all out-door sports, until——"

"Alas, can this be he," interrupted Mildred pitifully, "who mounts the black horse—it is Raymond's own *Black Diamond*—at the Hall steps ? Why, he moves like an old man ; they almost lift him into the saddle. How worn and thin he looks, and how deadly pale !"

"Ay, Madam, and so he always looks, except, they say, when he is at the full gallop, ahead of all the field, and thinks himself alone ; then some that have been near him say he cries out dreadful things, threats against this and that man, and even against my mistress—or breaks into mad songs ; while over his face there comes a look exactly like what his great-great-grandsire, Guy, wears—that is his picture as used to hang in the gallery—him, you know, as leaped into Hell Gates ; and, what seems stranger still, he takes a pleasure in that awful spot, and places like it, which lead Heaven knows whither. Three nights ago he made *Black Diamond* take the stone wall into Pot-hole Field, where never man on horse dared go before, and galloped in and out among the chasms, until William seized his bridle, and led him out by force."

"I thank your brother for that deed," cried Mildred fervently, "if for naught else. All are moving off, and

yet I do not see him. Why is he not there now to see his master does not come to harm ? ”

“He serves Mrs. Clyffard, Madam, not Mr. Rupert, unless by her command, and perhaps she has ordered it otherwise.”

“I forgot,” returned Mildred coldly. “Is it her pleasure that we arise now like the rest of the household, or wait for morning ? ”

“You will please yourself, Madam ; but the child has always kept its usual hours since it has been in my charge, and if you do not mind the loneliness—for the days are very long and lone here——”

“By no means,” interrupted Mildred bitterly ; “the faces are few indeed at Clyffe whose absence I shall mourn. Nay, do not cry, my darling, my sweet Milly. Let us to bed again, and try once more to forget our sorrows.”

“The child is hungry, Madam,” observed Lucy in the same deprecating tone which she had so often used before ; “I have food for her in the cupboard, if you please let me rise and give it her.” Not waiting for an answer she got up, and striking a light—for the last glimmer of the torches of the receding hunt had by this time faded away—set milk and bread upon the table. “Will you not take something yourself, dear Madam ? ” entreated she respectfully. “I have meat and wine here which are not poisoned. For your child’s sake, you should not starve yourself.”

“Are you friend or foe ? ” inquired Mildred searchingly. “If not a friend, I beseech you do not mock me with this lip-service. Stay—now tell me”—she took the woman by the arm, and scanned her face—“are you my well-wisher ? ”

Not a feature changed, not a ray of intelligence gave token that the allusion was understood. In the simplest tone she answered, “Yes, Madam, indeed I am. Why should I not be so ? ” Then suddenly perceiving the key, which Mildred in her agitation had left in the door leading to the postern, she cried with fervency, “Heaven be praised that you are here alive ! You have opened

yonder door. It may be you are a sleep-walker, so I will take the key ; but, oh ! Madam, beware of what you do. Be sure you never venture forth in daylight without me by your side. At earliest morn they set the bloodhound loose—Red Rufus—who is so terrible to strangers.”

“But I did not meet a bloodhound when I came hither.”

“No, Madam,” answered Lucy, with hesitation, and hanging down her head ; “it was loosed afterwards, and it is always so to be ; I heard my mistress say so.”

“That is a prison, indeed, from which it is death to attempt to flee !” exclaimed Mildred vehemently. “Has this lady whom you serve, then, the right to issue a warrant for my execution ?”

“Your Aunt Grace charged me, remember, not to leave you, Madam, night or day, and with me you are safe ; and the child, thank Heaven, is safe, for I myself took her to Rufus, and the huge hound licked her baby hand in love, which having done he is her friend for ever.”

“Thanks for that, Lucy,” quoth Mildred, shuddering still at the peril to which she had so nearly exposed herself. “I will not strive to free myself again ; I will trust to God alone and such help as He may send me ; and I will trust in you, Lucy, although you promise nothing, for I do think you wish me well.”

Then Mildred ate a little, and presently disrobed, and once more laid her weary head upon the pillow, and slept so soundly that she never heard the night hunt coming home across the echoing bridge, nor woke again till it was broad bright day.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE.

How unchanging are fair Nature's features ! Time, which destroys all *our* poor beauty, does but heighten hers ; while even the torch of war, which lays the homestead waste and kindles into ruin all that man has built, or sown, or planted, leaves her scarcely scathed, and swift to repair damage, covering the bloodiest grave with green. Crime, and wrong, and woe affect her nothing. She supplies this life's stage with matchless scenes, let the actors play what they will, and smiles upon the direst tragedies as on the peacefulest domestic dramas. Never did spring morning dawn more brightly, or broaden on into a more glorious day, than that which on the morrow bade in vain the inmates of Clyffe Hall rise from their shameful sleep, and smote Grace Clyffard's pillowed but unrestful face with unaccustomed blushes. Eden itself, be sure, was not less fair after the fall, than when it pleased the innocent eyes of our first parents ; and Ribble towered as nobly in the sky, and flashed its hundred streams as bright and purely as though no curse, nor Carr, had ever vexed the house of Clyffard.

"How well you loved old Ribble, Madam !" said Lucy Cator, as Mildred's eyes devoured the glorious hill as the three crossed the park.

"Ay, that I do," replied she with eager passion ; then added, less warmly, "look how the cloud-berry

dyes its very crown, as though the sunrise lingered there !
How beautiful it is ! ”

“ Yes, Madam, but very cruel. Its boggy fells have smoozed poor folk before now ; and others have spent weary years in jail, for hunting on its slopes the wild red deer, before the Clyffards built them in.”

“ Do you remember that, Lucy ? ”

“ Ay, that I do, Madam ; and when the tenants hereabouts—of whom my father once was one, before the evil days came on us—were all called ‘ foresters,’ and sworn to cherish and preserve the vert and venison. It was an old-world place in those days, with old-world customs, such as you have never heard of. We were very simple folk. There was not such a thing as a time-piece in all Clyffe, save that in the clock tower of the Hall, and the young master’s hunting-watch which struck the hours. Poor Mr. Cyril, how I mind his showing me that toy ! As for glasses to tell the weather—yon mountain was the only glass we had :

‘ If Ribble’s head do wear a hood,
Be sure the day will ne’er hold good ’—

that was all we knew about the weather.”

“ But if the Cators are Clyffe people, how is it that they came to serve the Carrs ? ”

“ Well,” returned Lucy hesitatingly, “ they thought, I suppose, to better themselves. Besides, we didn’t occupy the place here we had been used to, and for poor people it was not so pleasant to live hereabouts. You may talk of law, but in those days, what the Clyffard said was law, nay, what his steward or bailiff even chose to say : if a man trod on either side the public way that cuts the park, some forester would take him by the collar, and beat him like a dog. Look there, at yonder gentleman before us, loitering by the beck—some wandering artist, I suppose, by his portfolio. Well, in the times I speak of—— But here Rufus comes. There is no fear, Madam. He always runs to us thus to bid ‘ good-morning.’ ”

"Take the child," cried Mildred. "There *is* fear, I say. The dog is angry—furious."

"By Heaven, and so he is!" exclaimed Lucy. "He is tracking some one, but not us. Alas! it is that wretched man. He will tear his life out." Then, raising her voice to its full pitch, she cried, "Flee—flee up-stream, and hide!"

The person addressed was too far off to catch her words, although the sound attracted him. But he looked up and saw the dog, whose dreadful errand it was not difficult to understand. With nose to ground, the mighty creature came on at headlong speed, now swerving this way, now the other, as the careless footsteps of the man had loitered devious, but never stopping for one instant.

"Flee, for your life!" screamed the two women with one voice; and the man turned and fled, but not up-stream. A little wading in the water, and then one of the numerous hollows in the wave-worn rock would have concealed him safely, at all events, until Lucy could have come up and calmed the beast; but instead of that, he climbed the eastern bank, and made for the boundary-wall of the deer park. Up to that time, a hoarse deep bay had ever and anon broken like a knell upon the women's ears; but the instant that the man shewed himself, the dog was dumb, and ran straight as arrow from the bow.

A terrible cry escaped from Mildred's lips, and she covered her eyes with her hand.

"The man runs very fast," said Lucy comfortingly; "it is possible that he may yet reach the wall first, and that Rufus cannot leap it."

"But if he does?" moaned Mildred.

"Then Heaven have mercy on the poor doomed wretch!" answered Lucy fervently. "He is not one of the Clyffe people—a stranger seeking the cave, perhaps, without a guide—and the brute will—But he hears the wall. With what strength and speed the fear of death has winged him! He climbs it, and the dog springs after him, but fails and falls; and now he springs

again. Alas, he has dragged himself to the very summit, and——Oh my God!"

"What, what? I dare not look, Lucy. I charge you, tell me what has happened?"

"A miracle!" cried Lucy joyfully. "A moment ago, and I should have replied, 'A murder.' The dog comes back again: he must have known the man, although I know him not, who, as I thought, knew everybody hereabouts. See, he comes this way, gambolling like a puppy; he is joyful, because he has found a friend, and one, too, who has authority to bid him come and go. I should not have deemed that any man save William, and the poor master himself, could have had such power over Rufus."

With red tongue lolling low, wide jaws, and chest all flecked with foam, the huge beast thundered up; but his eyes were no longer aflame, nor each hair of his russet coat bristling as before with brutish hate and lust of combat. Lucy patted his vast head, bent low before her; then gave him Mildred's hand to kiss, in token of fealty.

"Now you are friends," quoth she; "you need never fear him more.—But who was that old acquaintance, Rufus, you have just parted from? I protest that I am somewhat curious to see him. But if—for you look very pale, Madam—this scene has been too much for you, let us go home, and postpone your visit to the cave, which, indeed, you now may not find solitary. I cannot think what could have brought the man hither, unless to see it; for the gate is as often left unlocked as locked."

"Thank you, good Lucy, but I must do as I have purposed," returned Mildred resolutely; "I feel better now."

Nevertheless, she henceforth moved with trembling, and scarce could hold her little one, as she stooped to pluck the wild-flowers by the way—the early orchis, the pale blue violet (as great a prize to her as though it were not scentless,) and the white sorrel, striped with blue; or strove to clasp the golden saxifrage (almost

as vain a task as to rob the butterfly's wings of their rich bloom), and babbled of all the glory of the spring in her unknown tongue. Above the entrance of the cave itself, the snow-white bird-cherry drooped like a knight's plume; while in front, Nature had spread a carpet of forget-me-nots.

"How fitly these grow here!" said Mildred with swimming eyes. "Will you wait for us, good Lucy, and wait patiently? This torch"—taking one from the heap which always lay within the ante-chamber—"will last me for two hours and more."

"I will wait, Madam," returned the other. "I will trust your word not to rob yourself of God's good gift of life; you know not indeed, you know not, lady—how much of happiness it even yet may have in store for you."

Mildred's voice faltered as she answered, "That is true, good Lucy; and you will never repent this day, I think."

She stooped down, for she was taller than the other, and kissed her cheek, which was like a shrivelled apple, that had, however, retained its ruddy hue. Then, having lit the torch with flint and steel, she took her way with her astonished babe into the heart of Ribble, with expectations higher than had filled the soul even of him who was the first to explore its hidden glories; for where was treasure of earth or fairyland that could compare with that she well knew lay hid in the cathedral chamber—whence from the darkness, with a joyful cry, sprang forth her own brave husband—her Raymond, loved as only those are loved who have been lost, mourned as the unreturning dead alone are mourned; but found, and hers once more!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BURIED IN THE CHALK.

WHEN Gideon Carr last looked down upon his victim from the Beacon Cliff, he saw him, as he thought, within a few seconds of death ; and when, his attention being called elsewhere an instant, he no longer beheld him clinging to the bare white wall, he naturally imagined that he had fallen sheer upon the beach beneath. Such would have been the case with nineteen out of twenty men in a strait like that of Raymond Clyffard's ; but years of voluntary hardship, such as sportsmen use, had made his sinews lithe and strong as steel ; and running (where no horse could gallop) on the craggy fells in chase of the hill-fox, had made his limbs as supple as any bird-catcher's who gains his bread at peril of his neck ; and leaping from rock to rock, in many a foaming beck to cheer his hounds upon the otter, had given him eye as true as his who, on the slender rope, appears to totter, only to deceive the gaping crowd below him. And though as brave as any who drew breath, Raymond abhorred to die, and longed to live ; and even in that extremity, held on with his manly soul to hope, as to the cliff with his strong fingers, and took his measures with cool brain upon the very brink of what seemed sure destruction.

I have said that on his right hand lay a sort of gutter, down which, indeed, most persons would have shot at once, but which to him, as he clung panting to the pre-

cipice, seemed to offer some salient points, some coignes of vantage, or, at all events, a preferable position to that which he at present occupied, exposed to any action of his mortal foe, a touch with whose walking-stick or finger-tip must needs have been his instant death-doom.

He was by no means so exhausted, or at least so near to utter collapse, as he seemed; and taking advantage of Gideon's momentary glance aside, he slid down along this almost perpendicular track as slowly as feet and hands could serve him to arrest the force of gravity. At last—that is, after such a second of time as might count against a year of ordinary life—he found that he had stopped himself. Above him hung the frowning brow of the precipice, under which his sideways course had brought him, so that he was quite hidden from his enemy's sight. He had just possessed himself of that fact, when, from the depths below, came up the innumerable flocks of sea-fowl, as though to resent his intrusion into their almost aerial domains. The touch of a passing wing would have set him falling, like another Lucifer, through space; their hideous and unexpected din, which even alarmed his murderer, standing on the solid earth, shook his very soul within him, and closing his eyes, he waited for a moment, as though for the stroke of doom. Upon the sloping ledge on which he lay, never before had any creature bigger than a bird found foothold; a few more inches, and it terminated, as Raymond found out afterwards, without a rim, a crack, a nodosity—smooth, as though a carpenter's plane had levelled it. If he had known it then, even *his* iron nerves might have given way, or proved unequal to the task that lay before him. But when he dared to take his eyes from the slope to which he clung with foot and finger, he steadily turned them to the cliff alone, notwithstanding that there seemed some devil within him that prompted him to glance into the unfathomable gulf below, and so to perish. Then he perceived upon his right hand, and so close that he could touch it had he dared to move, a hollow in the chalk, large

enough to contain his body, and which seemed to widen with its depth. To the *mens sana*, reasoning in its arm-chair, or indeed to any person who possessed the advantage of level ground, his getting into this hole would have seemed merely the exchange of a speedy death for one equally certain, although more lingering; but to *him*, stretched on that ledge of death, it appeared (so comparative is the estimate of what is good) a very haven of security—a consummation scarcely to be hoped for, so intense was his desire to attain it. Yes, that five-foot orifice in the otherwise unbroken wall of white seemed to him like the gate of heaven.

Slowly as a snail creeps, writhingly as a worm crawls, and trailing his whole body along the ground, like one in pain, Raymond dragged himself inch by inch into the hole. Then brain and muscle failed together, and he lay for a little like one dead—to all appearance as though he had fallen indeed through many a fathom of space upon that pebbly beach. When consciousness returned, he found himself in an excavation of considerable extent, the roof of which was sufficiently high to permit him to stand upright. From this dark recess the broad blue showed brighter, and the sparkling sea seemed to smile more joyously, than Raymond had ever seen them; the sea-birds' screams, which had not as yet by any means subsided, had now a note of gratulation for his ear; and thankfully his throbbing brow welcomed the clear breezes, the very softest of which had whispered to him but a few minutes back of death. Then with the sense of present safety arose new fears, new needs. How was it possible that he should ever escape from such a prison? It was most unusual, he well knew, for vessels of any kind to venture close in-shore among the rocks and islets; and even if they did so, how was he to draw attention to himself in such a strange and unlooked-for place of durance?

Moreover, if even he should make people aware of his being in such a predicament, by what means could he be extricated? Long before they could dig down to him through the solid rock, he would assuredly perish

of hunger, unless the guillemots and gulls should bring him food, as the ravens nourished the prophet of old. As for any human creature coming to his assistance by the way he came, or as to himself attempting to escape by the same road, his brain reeled at the very thought of such a chance; he could see now the full extent of the peril to which he had been so lately exposed, and having seen it, his whole being revolted at the idea of tempting destruction a second time in the like manner. What he had heard of the wondrous agility of the bird-catchers in these parts did indeed cross his mind, but he well knew how the rock above him overhung his place of refuge, and felt with a sinking of his noble heart, that even to those human spiders he was inaccessible.

What, however, most occupied Raymond's thoughts, and racked him with anxiety, was how to attract the attention of his fellow-creatures, not for his own sake, but that Mildred and her child might be warned in time of the murderous design of Gideon Carr. To foresee misfortune falling over our dearest ones, and to be powerless to avert it—there is no anguish bites like that! It is the very nightmare of reality—a curse that only falls on most of us, thank Heaven, in dreams. How should he let her know her danger? Should he pencil it out a score of times upon the backs of certain letters that he happened to have with him, and trust them, like the Sibyl's leaves, to the winds, in hopes that one at least might flutter to the hand of a friend? Alas, the wind was blowing from off-shore, and forbade even that promiseless project. Or should he enclose a letter in the case of his hunting-watch, and drop it on the beach below, on the chance of its attracting the attention of some passer-by?—where neither pleasure nor business brought a human creature from one month's end to another! Sick at heart with the conviction of the futility of any such schemes, Raymond turned wearily away from the mocking sunshine, and sought the gloom of the interior of the cave.

As he did so, it struck him for the first time how

strange it was that there were no sea-birds, nor any traces of them, in a place so much better adapted for their purposes than the precarious ledges all about him, which were swarming with eggs and callow young. What could have kept out such tenants from so convenient an abode? No animal inimical to their kind could harbour in such a position, while eyrie of hawk or kestrel it certainly was not. His third footstep struck against something soft, which he carried with some difficulty, though without resistance, to the light, when this riddle in natural history received its solution.

The reason why the guillemots avoided the cave was, because it was the occasional resort of man, or, at all events, bore tokens of his presence. What Raymond had dragged forth was a huge bundle neatly packed in sailcloth, and containing a large quantity of foreign lace. Half a dozen similar packages were arranged in a semicircle, at the far end of the cavern, along with two or three bales of rich and handsome shawls. These costly articles were not very useful to Raymond in his present position, except that, collectively, they formed a by no means despicable bed. Their chief value to him lay in the fact that they needs must have a mortal owner, who had probably some mechanical means of communicating with his property. It would have been a speculation of considerable importance to Raymond had his own interest been alone at stake, as to when this communication took place, with respect to his bodily sustenance—for meat and drink are at least as much necessities of life as Brussels lace and French shawls—but his anxiety concerning his wife and child swallowed up all other cares. Again and again, as he grew accustomed to the semi-darkness of his retreat, he minutely examined the walls and roof in search of some means of egress, by which he could make his way to Pampas Cottage, first to protect his dear ones, and then to avenge them; but all was solid chalk. Remembering, too, how far beneath the surface the cave was situated, and, in particular, how liable to observation any opening needs must be, made at the very top of the Beacon

Down, he became satisfied that nothing of the sort existed. Secrecy was evidently the main consideration with those who stored their goods in such a place as that in which Raymond now found himself, nor had he any doubt but that he was in a hiding-place of the free-traders, as they called themselves, persons in advance of their age, whom the less favoured part of the community stigmatised as smugglers. It was likely enough that some of his Sandby friends were part-owners of these very goods, which, indeed, were far too valuable to belong to any one individual. This, however (as it seemed to Raymond at the time), was a matter of very secondary consequence. Shawls and lace might belong to the breakers of the law or not; all that concerned him was that those who claimed to be the owners might send to fetch them—although by what means he could not so much as guess—ere the dreadful morrow upon which hung the fate of Mildred and the child.

But the curtain of night descended slowly upon a sailless sea, and the hours of darkness wearily wore on without a sound, save the monotonous murmur of the wave, and the shrill scream of the herring-gull and the kittiwake.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE SAUCY SALL.

WITH the first dawn of morning, Raymond swept the sea with a little spy-glass, which he had put in his pocket the previous day for the use of Mr. Stevens ; there was one stately vessel visible that had just started upon the broad highway of the Atlantic for the western world ; but the instrument which told him that much, by showing him the streaming stars and stripes, could bring the ship no nearer, save to his vision ! The wind had partially lulled which had hurried the clouds in flocks athwart the moon all night, and the huge three-master made but little way. It was agony to the captive to watch her lessening hull, her masts dwindling inch by inch to a mere stick of canvas, then sinking altogether out of sight ; and yet he well knew that though he had caught sight of her from the first, she could not have come within distance, by a mile, for any signal of his to be discerned, far less attended to.

A few hours later, but still very early in the morning, the preventive boat from Marmouth passed on its way to Lucky Bay ; but it, too, gave the outlying rocks and reefs so wide a berth, that all signs and cries were unavailing. He had made bold to strip one of the precious bales of its sailcloth covering, to flutter flag-wise at the mouth of the cave ; but at the distance which the cutter kept, it could have shown no larger than an albatross's wing. Moreover, unlike one placed

upon the down, or even on the beach, he was in a position where no mortal would think of looking for a human creature, or of taking any sign as made by man: Foot by foot, the cutter slowly drew away, for the wind was not in her favour, and tacked and tacked, though never near the shore, till presently the headland cut her off. Neither food nor drink had Raymond taken for twelve hours, yet the fever of his blood ran high; and like a wild beast in his lair, he paced his narrow prison, feeling desire for nothing save to be free. The day drew on, and with it drew the fatal time when Gideon was to put his murderous design into execution. The tide was almost at its lowest, which was the only period at which the Mermaid Cavern could be reached, and which Raymond himself had bidden his wife remember, appointing as it were with his own breath the hour of her doom.

He was about to lose the beloved partner of his life, the wife of his youth, still beautiful as a bride, the mother of his innocent child—nay, and that helpless child herself as well—at the hands of one already a murderer in intent, and whom neither beauty nor helplessness would move a hair's-breadth from his cruel purpose. Thoughts like these would have been enough to drive some men mad in a like position, or to tempt them to end such mental agony by one leap forth into the viewless air; but not so Raymond. If he could not save, he might still live to be avenged. Sooner or later, surely he would escape from his living grave; then, wifeless, childless, he would track the wretch who had made him desolate—ay, though the pursuit should lead him half round the world; and then, face to face, the victim risen from the tomb to confront his murderer—then, for a few brief minutes, he would taste of that nearest approach to joy which would then be left to him—revenge! Foot to foot, hand to hand—and, better, without a weapon, for so the thing would last the longer—how he would woo that ruffian to the combat, and bear him backwards with tardy but relentless force, and squeeze the life out of his lying throat

by slow degrees ! He should come twice to life again, and die three times ; once for himself, in payment for the time when Gideon mocked him in the very jaws of seeming death ; and once--the husband's breath came quick and short the while he thought upon it--once for Mildred ; and once again for the child ; and then his dark soul should wing its way to hell. Raymond Clyffard's veins swelled into knots, and his fingers dug into the flesh of his clenched hands the while he thought upon his great revenge. He had never been so near the fate of his race before, as when he brooded over that grim picture ; the curse of the Clyffards almost came upon him. But as though he had felt that it was nigh, and knew that if it fell he would be powerless for the work of retribution, he beat it back as it were by force, and compelled his mind into other channels. He made it count the puffins as they stood in single file upon the ledges beneath, and mark how often the green-eyed haggard cormorant dived within the hour, and how long remained before he emerged from under water with dragged wing.

Towards noon, something occurred, however, which of itself demanded his attention. The little revenue-cutter once more rounded the point upon its return-voyage to Marmouth. He forgot at the moment the arrangement which had been made by Lieutenant Carey for the transportation of Stevens to Mermaid Bay, and it was with a great cry of fury that through his glass he discerned the form, although not the features of his enemy. The boat this time seemed coming in quite close to shore, so near that his signals could not fail to be observed, and Raymond's heart had begun to beat with hope as well as passion, when suddenly her course was turned to seaward, and she made for the outlying pillar of chalk which was called the Dutchman. This change of tack at first originated in a natural disinclination on the part of Gideon Carr to approach the scene of his yesterday's crime, where the tide might by chance have left some ghastly evidence of it, or even the white cliff presented some damning stain ; but as he continued

to scan the spot through the boatswain's glass, he caught sight of Raymond's signal, which for the moment struck icy terror to his soul, and produced the change which we have already described to have occurred in him; and finding the boatswain importunate for the possession of the glass, he purposely dropped it into the sea, although even through *it*, it is doubtful whether any other eye but his own could have perceived that which had so moved him. Nay, after a little thought, Gideon almost convinced himself that what he imagined he had beheld was merely the effect of morbid fancy; and as the cutter drew further and further from the land, so his wicked conscience grew less disturbed.

Then came the incident of Walter Dickson's craft being seen running close in-shore towards Sandby, and at once all his fears returned. If, by any miracle, Raymond Clyffard was really yet alive, and what he had seen had indeed been a signal of his supposed victim, intended as a demand for help, those on board the smuggling vessel could not fail presently to see it; hence Mr. Stevens's passionate attempt to induce the crew of the revenue-cutter to arrest Dickson's course. We know that that appeal was futile, and how the cutter kept on her way, and carried Gideon Carr to his righteous doom in Mermaid Bay; but Raymond only knew that so far, at least, the murderer's plans had been successful, and that probably within that very hour both wife and child would perish through his cursed guile, choked by the pitiless tide. No mental torture could have been contrived by tyrant of old more poignant than that he was doomed to feel when he beheld in the far distance the cutter with its hateful burden at last standing in for the land. Scarcely, however, had he done so, when what should come swirling round the eastern promontory, through a passage, thought to be somewhat dangerous, between the mainland and a cluster of outlying fragments of it called the "Stark," but the lugger of Mr. Walter Dickson, so close to the cliffs that one who stood upon the Beacon Down might have almost tossed a biscuit on to her slanting deck. On she came, noiseless

and swift as a white phantom, steered by Mr. Dickson himself, who, with half-shut eyes, lay dreamily in the stern-sheets, as though his slender craft were in no more danger than if she were coasting upon Ullswater."

"They're allus out upon some fool's errand or other," observed young Richard Brock, who, with two others, made up the crew of the lugger, in continuation of some remarks called forth by their meeting with the revenue-boat. "If they had been off Mermaid Bay three nights ago, instead of now, they might ha' done a good stroke o' business."

"They would not have got it cheap, whatever they got," answered his father from the bow-thwarts, removing his pipe from his mouth in order to give due emphasis to an imprecation. "Fifteen hundred pound-worth of shawls and laces—— Where the devil are you steering us to, Walter? *Port*, man, *port*, or we shall be on *Gull's Castle*!" And, indeed, so near to the outlying chalk-rock of that name did the lugger pass, that as the old seaman gave his warning, he also kicked off his shoes in readiness for a swim.

"Look, mate, look!" cried Walter Dickson, scarcely conscious of the danger they had so narrowly escaped; "there's somebody in *Martin's Nest*."

The sensation which this exclamation produced upon the crew of the lugger was most extraordinary; they did not indeed start from their seats, as landsmen would have done, but each uttered a hasty ejaculation of wrath and wonder, as his looks followed the direction of the steersman's eyes to where Raymond could be plainly seen fluttering his signal, and gesticulating with the utmost vehemence. He was calling to them, too, at the top of his voice, and adjuring them to return at once to Mermaid Bay, and save his wife and child; but the distance was too great and the wind too violent to suffer them to catch a word he said, although they guessed by his motions that he was endeavouring to make himself heard.

"Who is it?" cried old Will Brock savagely. "What cursed fool can have risked going there in daylight, and

without leave or licence, too, from those who have the best right to give it?"

"It ain't one of our folks at all," answered his son, shading his eyes with his hands, as he scanned the shining cliff; "it's Mr. Raymond Hepburn, of the Cottage."

"The worse for him," muttered the old man furiously. "Is there not a gun in the boat? Pass it here, boy. I am going to shoot a razor-bill—that is all."

"No, no; none of that," interposed Dickson; "we should only make bad worse by anything of that sort."

"Fifteen hundred pound-worth of shawls and laces," exclaimed the other with passion; "the best run I ever made in my life; and all that you and I and the rest of us have in the world! Are you going to risk all that, Walter Dickson, for a friend of them blasted blue-jackets? Give me the gun, I say."

"No, Will; you shall not do murder — or rather attempt it, for that fowling-piece would not carry half the distance. 'Tis clear that this man has not been seen by anybody as yet, or he would not be playing such frantic tricks yonder, in order to let us know he was there. How he ever got into the *Martin's Nest*, I know not; but he is evidently alone. We have only him to deal with in the matter, and if we can keep him quiet——"

"There is only one way that makes all safe," interrupted the old man gloomily. "Why he will get half that's there for merely saying it *is* there."

"Nay, nay; Mr. Hepburn is a gentleman, and his wife has been good to my old woman," answered Dickson warmly; "and you have been my mate, Will, for these thirty years, and one of whom I should be sorry to have to say, 'That man was hanged for murder.' I have as large a stake in yonder goods as any man here, and should be equally loath to lose it, but there is blood enough on that Beacon Cliff already."

"Only a coast-guardsmen," muttered one of the crew who had not yet spoken.

"Very true, Elliot," returned Dickson quietly; "al-

though, let me tell you, it does not become one of your stock to talk like that. In the heat of a fight, one may chance to get blood upon one's hands, and hardly know how it came there. But pushing folks over precipices—ay, you may frown and swear, too, for all I care—or shooting them in cold blood, while they are asking us for help, like this one—such things are not to my taste, nor do I believe that good can come of them.”

“Then what do you propose to do, Master Clear-conscience?” inquired Brock sullenly. “Is Lieutenant Carey and his friend, this Mr. Hepburn, to go shares together in our property?”

A hoarse murmur of rage and dissatisfaction came from the throats of the two sailors, who had themselves no little interest in the proceeds of the late “run,” and whom this reference to the intimacy between the commander of the coast-guard and the present subject of conversation excited to fury.

“I will go bail that no one here suffers any loss,” replied Walter Dickson resolutely. “The *Saucy Sall* is worth something, and I have a little money at bank, which, in case of the worst, shall be at your service. There—does that suit you, mates?”

All reluctantly allowed that under these circumstances, so far as they were concerned, they had certainly no further right to complain, but, at the same time, they avowed their disinclination to accept so generous an offer.

“No, no,” said Brock, with a gleam of kindly feeling in his hard grey eyes; “we ain’t a-going to cut our cable from you, old fellow. We’re in a heavy sea; but if we pull together with a will, we may perhaps keep our shirt-collars dry yet.”

“That’s well said, mate,” answered Dickson cheerily. “Now, my plan is this—to get one of our people to visit the *Martin’s Nest* this very night. If I was as lissom as I used to be——”

“I will go,” interrupted young Richard Brock sententiously. “There will be moon enough for that.”

“You’re a good fellow,” replied Dickson, with much

heartiness ; "and your father is proud of you, for all that he looks like a cormorant who has just dropped a fish. You shall visit the poor gentleman, my lad, and explain matters. It will be hard upon him as well upon us, we may be sure ; but you must make him see the necessity of being a prisoner for some time to come at least, and more than that of his remaining quiet, so that nobody but ourselves may know where he is. If the *Martin's Nest* was discovered, even without its golden eggs, it would be a heavy blow to the good cause."

"Ay, that it would," murmured the crew as with one voice, but no longer with peevish sullenness ; for their confidence in Walter Dickson was great ; and now that a little time had been allowed for reflection even old Will Brock confessed to himself that his friend's counsel had been wiser than his own, as well as more humane.

Throughout the period of this conversation, the lugger had been making short tacks in front of the Beacon Cliff, since it would have been dangerous to bring her up in such an anchorage ; as for landing, it was not to be thought of at that place ; nor if it could have been done, would it have availed for any intercourse between the crew and Raymond, so great was even yet the force of the wind, and the distance between the beach and his place of captivity. *He* could indeed have communicated with them (through the medium, as already suggested, of something written and enclosed in the cover of his hunting watch), but, of course, they had no cause to suspect the urgent necessity of the case, and were unwilling to risk the peril of a disembarkation, from which, as it seemed to them, no good could possibly come. In a few minutes more, the unhappy man, whose hopes for the rescue of his wife and child had been lately so flattered, had the misery to read their fate (as he had every reason to fear) in a few ill-spelled words, printed with chalk upon a board, and held over the side of the lugger :

"*Be Pashent. Help will come to-nite. But ON YOUR LIFE do not shew yourself again, or make any more signals.*"

Then in spite of his reiterated attempts by voice and gesture to reverse this fatal sentence, the head of the *Saucy Sall* was turned towards Sandby; and in a few more minutes the sea was once more sailless, and Raymond watching the cruel foam come crawling in, and listening to the long-drawn hiss of the rising tide with a heart robbed of its last hope.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HOW THE MARTIN'S NEST WAS DISCOVERED.

ONCE more the pale moon rose upon Raymond Clyffard in his captivity, and this time it looked down upon him pitifully, with scarce an intervening cloud ; tipped with her rays, each tiny wavelet (for the wind had dropped) broke into silver smiles ; the sapphire sea, like one great jewel, sparkled icily from marge to marge. But the captive had no eye for its beauty ; it would have been the same to him had inky darkness overspread the scene. Whatever canvas nature might have displayed, he would only have seen upon it the picture of a little home, emptied of all its happiness by one remorseless hand. His mind was sorely usurped by utter wretchedness ; the sense of desolation reigned supreme ; even revenge stirred not now within him. His long fast had doubtless combined with his late anxieties thus to prostrate him ; but one who had seen Raymond thirty-six hours before, as he stood upon Beacon Down, radiant with health and vigour, would scarcely have recognised him, as with woe-begone face and lack-lustre eye, he sat within his solitary prison. It was nearly midnight, but he felt no desire for sleep ; and yet so occupied were his thoughts, that he could hardly be said to be a waking, conscious man. As he saw nothing, so he heard nothing of what was passing around him. It was only when a huge object suddenly darkened the mouth of the cave, and then

retired, leaving it light again, that he became conscious that he was not alone—that there was a human being swinging to and fro in front of the *Martin's nest*, now touching the threshold with his feet, and now leaping out again into space, so as to gain a greater impetus, and thereby penetrate still further upon his return. "Can you not shorten matters, Sir," cried this human spider, "by catching hold of me presently?" The voice of his fellow-creature acted upon Raymond like a restorative; he leaped up from his costly couch of shawls and laces in time to seize his visitor the very next swing of the pendulum, and retain him in his grasp. "Hold tight, Sir," cried Richard Brock, for he it was who presented himself under these very peculiar circumstances. "You have no idea (however anxious you may be to leave the *Martin's Nest*) how a body wants to get out of it which has entered after *this* fashion. But what's the matter with you, Sir, beside hunger and want of room?"

"Can you tell me any news of my wife?" gasped Raymond. "Tell me the worst at once, man; is she alive or dead?"

"Lor bless you, Sir, alive and well—why not? I saw her this very evening."

"God be praised!" cried Raymond, fervently, wringing the man's hand who had brought him such blessed tidings. "And is my child safe too?"

Richard hesitated a little.

"What! has that devil Stevens drowned my child?"

"No, no, Sir. Don't call names. The man you speak of is drowned hisself, poor wretch, held by a stone-crab in the Mermaid Cavern, until the tide came up and— Well, that's a strange thing to be thanking Heaven for, unless, maybe, you are thinking that the chap was a coast-guardsmen, which, it seems, he was not, after all."

"He was a murderer in thought, if not in deed," returned Raymond, sternly, "as I will tell you."

"All in good time, Sir," observed the young man, cheerily; "but first you take this bread and meat, and let the brandy in that flask fetch up a little colour into your cheek. You must be main hungry, so use your

teeth and rest your tongue while I take the eggs here out of the *Martin's Nest*." With these words the young man began fastening two of the bales to the rope of three-inch cow-hide which had brought him, a hundred feet of which, at least, besides what he had himself required for his descent, were in the hands of his friends upon the down above. "Now, do not fear but I shall return for the rest," cried he; "and when I have cleared all these goods, I will still come back and keep you company."

"But why not take me with you instead of the bales?" inquired Raymond, with whom good news and a few morsels of food had already worked wonders, and who felt quite equal to any peril or exertion the object of which should be to set him on *terra firma*.

"I will tell you that presently, and everything else it concerns you to know, Mr. Hepburn; but duty first, say I (unless it's revenue duty), and pleasure afterwards; so here goes." With that the young man stepped into the air with his burden as calmly as a tide-waiter would step from deck to quay, and keeping himself off the rock with his nimble feet, was rapidly hauled up to the summit of the down above. Then again descending, and being caught by Raymond as before, he took away more bales, and so on till the cave was bare. "You do not think I will desert you, Mr. Hepburn?" said the young man, frankly, as he started with his last freight, and Raymond was watching his movements with wistful eyes.

"No, Richard, I do not. I can easily understand why I am not to see how those bundles of——"

"Gulls' feathers," interrupted the young man, smiling; "we cliff-fowlers make our living by collecting them, you know."

True to his promise, Richard Brock once more descended, bringing with him this time some rugs and blankets, as well as a further supply of provisions. At sight of these Raymond looked by no means grateful.

"What!" cried he, "am I to stay in this place another night?"

"Ay, Sir, and another, and another, I fear, although no longer than I can help, I promise you. If I had been

the sole owner of what was here just now, you should be free at once, for I know that I could trust to your honour, and besides, I owe your good lady a kind turn for what she did to my Phœbe in her sickness. But there are others who are deeply concerned in the matter—it's the best run we have had this many a year, and everything must be got well away before we risk letting you out. Even then—I'm speaking what others say, Sir, and not my own thoughts—even then, you would do us a mort of mischief by telling about the *Martin's Nest*. It is the best place for stowage along the coast ; and all the better for the little mischance as happened to poor Price down yonder. The blue-jackets think the place uncanny, and shirk their night-watches upon the beacon in consequence. There's Walter Dickson up there now, holding on to this rope as quietly as though he was not sitting upon the beat of the coast-guard'sman ; though, indeed, if one should come, he has his answer ready : If one likes to go bird-fowling by night instead of by day, what's that to the custom-house ? They will never trust themselves at a rope's end to see what I'm about—of that I'm certain. And, by-the-bye, Mr. Hepburn, how in the name of the devil—for is he not called the Prince of the powers of the air in Holy Writ?—did you yourself chance to come here ? ”

“I climbed down by yonder ledge,” quoth Raymond coolly.

“What ! without a rope ? ” exclaimed the other with a perceptible shudder : “that is not humanly possible ! ”

“Yet by that means, and no other, did I come hither, Richard, although not of my own free will, as you shall hear.” Then Raymond narrated all the circumstances (so far as consisted with his assumed name of Hepburn) which had brought him into his present inconvenient plight. To the details of the attempted murder, his companion listened with not a little excitement and indignation ; but in the description of the means by which the *Martin's Nest* had at last been reached, his interest was manifested even still more keenly.

“You are the king of us all, Sir ! ” exclaimed the cliff-

fowler enthusiastically, when the tale was told. "There is not a man in Sandby who could have got here from the cliff-top as you did; no, nor ever was one, I believe, even when Walter Dickson was young. He it was, Sir, who first discovered this place, and that in a very curious manner—one which I should have thought could scarcely have been equalled for strangeness, if I had not heard your story."

"And how was that?" inquired Raymond: not that he much cared to know, but because he began to feel a great repugnance to being left alone, and desired to retain his present companion with him as long as possible.

"Well, Sir, it was when Dickson was quite a boy, about sixteen or so, and when Sandby was not so full of folk as it is now: there were scarcely any cliff-fowlers then, for there was a better trade than bird-nesting to take to, and all hands were wanted for it, so that the gulls had an easy life of it to what they have now, and were only plagued by the boys. Dickson and my father were playmates at that time, as they're workmates now, and have been so these thirty years and more; always together, shrimpin' and fishin', or risking their necks about the cliffs with letting one another down by a bit of rope such as nobody but madcaps like them would have trusted themselves to. One day, while knocking about in a coble, which, I believe, had been pronounced unseaworthy by the rightful owner—in the Beacon Bay here—Dickson spies out this dark hole.

"'What a lot of gulls' nests there ought to be in there!' says he.

"'What a lot there *are*!' cried my father, whom I have heard tell this story about a hundred and forty times. 'What a lot there are! for I can see 'em.'

"'I wish we could get at 'em,' continues Dickson.

"'What's the good o' wishin'?' answers my father. 'Don't you see how the cliff hangs over? You might as well wish to get at the moon.'

"'No, mate,' returns Dickson gravely, 'because you ain't got nowhere above the moon where you can stick a

stake in with a rope tied round it, and lower yourself down hand over hand ; let alone any stand point such as yonder down, where a chap one could depend upon—like you, Brock—might stand and hold the rope, and shift it properly.’

“‘You ain’t a-goin’ to try that, mate?’ says my father firmly, ‘nor anythink so foolhardy.’

“‘No, I’m not a-goin’ to try it ; I’m a-goin’ *to do it*,’ returned Walter Dickson. ‘Why, think what must be in that ’ere hole, mate, in which never a fowler yet has put his fingers, I’ll be bound ; what feathers and skins, and oil and eggs ! Why, I doubt whether even that last run, which your father (that’s *my* grandfather, Mr. Hepburn) is never tired of talking about, will ha’ brought more grist to the mill. Only, not a word about it to any soul, mind. They’d make us promise not to try it ; or, perhaps, it ’ud put it into somebody else’s head to do the very same thing before us.’

“‘You needn’t be a bit afraid of that last, boy,’ answers my father grimly enough ; ‘and as for the first, I am not one to blab and spoil sport ; and if you’re fixed upon it, why, I’m your man for anything. Only, you’ll never use this rotten old cord for such a place as yon, where you’ll have to swing right under—’

“‘No,’ replies Dickson, interrupting him sharp ; ‘I’m not a fool, although you chose, just now, to call me one.’

“‘I said “fool-hardy,”’ replied my father positively, ‘and I say it again.’

“‘Well, we’ll see what you say to-morrow, when you haul me up from yonder hole—under the eave of the down though it be, and for all the world like a *martin’s nest*—with my pockets full of fulmars. As for the rope, Lucy Pritchard’ (and here my father says Dickson blushed, for Lucy was the young girl as he was courting then, and whom he afterwards married), ‘will lend me that fine one which was her mother’s only marriage portion, and has never been any good to her, because she has no son. Lucy has often begged me, if I must needs go fowling, to use that rope, and so I’ll do it to-morrow, and to some purpose ; and as for the stake, if you do not

choose to hold me, lad, I will borrow an iron bar of the blacksmith ; so you may please yourself.'

"But when the morrow came, and found Walter Dickson on the Beacon Down, William Brock was there likewise ; and when the other, who was too proud to ask his help, since it was not offered, had thrust the bar into the earth, and fixed the rope, then says my father, 'And do you suppose as I'm goin' to let you risk your neck alone, mate? No, man, no. You and I are a-goin' to see this 'ere *martin's nest* together ; and if we miss it, why, even then we shall not be parted.'

"Then Walter and he shook hands, for they was very fond of one another as boys, as they are now, although they has their tiffs. 'Just as you like,' says he : 'the rope is strong enough for ten such as we, and the bar won't break.'

"Then, instead of tying the hide round their bodies as I and all sensible cliff-fowlers do—these mad boys lowered themselves slowly down, merely holding it in their hands ; and work enough they had, when they got opposite this place, to swing themselves into it, as you may guess when there was nobody within to help them in as you helped me. Moreover, my father says that the birds flew out upon them in hundreds—just as in the big print we've got stuck up at home of the opening of the doors of the Ark—and beat them with their wings, not that the poor timorous creatures showed any fight, but by reason of their excessive numbers. At last the two boys swung themselves sufficiently far within to obtain foothold, and my father instantly began to lay his hands on all with life that had not yet flown away. 'Quick, quick !' exclaimed he ; and Dickson, seeing how much he needed help, and what great spoil there was, ran towards him eagerly.

"The next instant both cried out together, 'The rope !' 'The rope !' But the recollection of it came too late ! My father had forgotten it at first, and now in his excitement Walter also let it go. So there it swung, now near, now far, but already too far to be reached, and coming with every swing less and less near. At last it hung

quite still, above five feet or so beyond the entrance ; and it will give you some notion of the extraordinary feat that you, Sir, have accomplished in arriving here, that neither of the boys, though cliff-fowlers, born, dared venture out upon yonder sloping ledge, and so approach the rope by your own road. If they had done so, however, it would even then have been beyond their reach.

"They were as completely trapped as any guillemot they had ever caught in springe. It might be days, as they well knew, before anybody discovered the bar upon the down above, and if that happened, he who found it would probably draw up the rope, and finding nothing would conceive that he who had left it there must needs have fallen into the sea. It was quite impossible to make their voices heard upon the cliff-top, and the *Martin's Nest* was unknown to all except themselves. Their only hope, like yours, lay in attracting the notice of some one on ship-board ; but they had no large sail-cloth such as you found here—nothing except their own clothes, which could not be seen save at a very little distance.

"The two boys looked at one another ruefully enough, each thinking of his home and friends, but Walter of his Lucy also, and of how she would reproach herself for having been the innocent means of his destruction, through lending him that fatal rope.

"Dickson was the first to speak. 'Robert,' said he 'we are in a bad plight enough, and if matters are to be mended, we must mend them ourselves. It is no use waiting here to be starved to death, or to be so weakened by hunger that we can do nothing that requires strength and courage. One of us must jump out at that rope, and take our chance of catching hold of it !'

"My father says he never felt his blood run so cold in all his life, as when he heard these words. But nevertheless he clearly saw the necessity of what the other proposed. 'I am ready, Walter,' says he simply ; 'and I think I am the lissomer of the two, and had better try first.'

"'Not so,' says Dickson ; 'I brought you into this

peril, and I must get you out of it. If I miss it, then it will be time enough for you to take *your* chance; and God send you better fortune !'

"'Thank *you*, mate,' replies my father sturdily; 'but I'd rather die like a brave man, than survive you upon such terms as those. 'We'll jump together, if you please, but you won't jump before me; that's certain.'

"'As for jumping together,' says Walter Dickson very vexed, 'that would only be another name for falling together; but since I know what a cruel obstinate chap you are, I'll consent to draw lots. Now, look you, here are two feathers, a black and a white; see I put my hands behind me, and if you guess which feather I hold in my right hand, then you shall jump first; if *not*——'

"'No, no,' interrupted my father sharply; 'I won't trust you, Walter; your heart is too kind to be honest in a matter like this. I myself will throw the feathers into the air, and whichever passes the ledge first, shall decide the question. If the black one falls the quicker, *I* jump; if the white one, *you*.'

"'So be it, Will, if you will have it so,' returned Dickson.

"The air was very calm and still that day, and the feathers were a long time descending from the height to which my father threw them. The two boys watched them with straining eyes, now poise, now quiver, now slowly sink, now caught in little eddies, until at last they reached the ledge, the white one first.'

"'I am glad of that,' said Dickson quietly, 'for otherwise I should have jumped from where I stand, and its better to have a run. Look here, Robert; I don't want to blubber about such things now, when all depends upon clear sight, but if I—if I miss the rope, and you get home again all right, as I trust you will, you'll give my love to mother, and father, and Lucy, and tell them —— But there, that's enough. God bless you, mate, if we don't happen to meet again just yet. Stand clear, there; one, two, three!'

"As he said these words, he leapt out at the rope with a great spring, and my father hid his face; nor did he

look up again, nor know what was happening—being in a sort of swoon like—until he felt Walter Dickson fastening the hide about his waist, and bidding him cheer up and fill his pockets. And that's the true story of how the *Martin's Nest* was first found out."

"And he that was the brave boy you speak of—Walter Dickson—is now awaiting you upon the down above us, is he?"

"The very man, Sir, and as brave as ever, only a good deal stiffer in the joints. Nevertheless he would have visited you here himself, if nobody else could have been got to do it; for Mrs. Hepburn has been very good to his old woman—she that was Lucy Pritchard once, and who owns this rope, which is the same I have been talking of all this time—as she was to my own poor Phœbe in the fever."

"Then being both so brave and grateful," pleaded Raymond, "will you not trust my honour not to betray the secret of the *Martin's Nest*?"

"Ay, that we should, Sir, if the matter concerned us only. But we have passed our word to keep you prisoner here till the goods removed this night have been disposed of, and that will take some time."

"At least you will let my poor wife know that I am safe; or else, when I do not return to-morrow, she is sure to think I have come to grievous harm."

"Well, Sir," answered the young man frankly, "we will do our best, Dickson and I; but no woman has ever yet been let into this secret, any more than if it was the Freemason's. I dare not trust it even to Phœbe. However, you may depend upon us two, Sir. Do not fret, and I shall be with you again to-morrow night at furthest."

"And you will have seen my wife and child?" said Raymond.

"I hope so," answered the young man evasively; for he knew that Milly had been carried away, although he thought it better not to harrow the father's heart by such sad news, while thus compelled to inaction and captivity. But he kept his promise, and so worked upon his father

with the help of Dickson that the old man at last gave permission that Mrs. Hepburn should be informed, under a strict oath of secrecy, that her husband was alive and in safe hands. It was this glad news which Walter Dickson came to impart that evening when he found Mrs. Carey at Pampas Cottage, and the revelation of which sent Mildred back, as we have seen, from the bedside of his "old woman," with such a lightened heart. Upon the other hand, through their prisoner, the free-traders became cognizant of the villainy of the man called Stevens, and exhibited it, with reference to the burial of his body, in the manner described. Still, they were much averse to set Raymond free, fearing that the secret must needs ooze out if they did so, and jealous of his intimacy with the people at Lucky Bay. Mildred and her husband, however, were permitted to correspond by letter—subject to a Sir James Graham's inspection of the correspondence—and it was with Raymond's full consent that Mrs. Hepburn undertook the expedition to Clyffe Hall in search of her lost Milly. The smugglers, too, were not displeased at an opportunity of giving the captive his liberty, which also insured his absence from the neighbourhood; so a few hours after Mildred's departure, his faithful friend and visitor, young Richard Brock, swung himself as usual into Raymond's (by this time tolerably furnished) lodgings, with the long wished-for information that the rope was ready to carry double.

So Raymond had followed his wife, post-haste, to Clyffe, and now met her, as they had agreed upon, in the heart of Ribble, for the first time since Gideon Carr had striven so hard to part them for ever.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MET TO PART.

"But what is it you propose to do at Clyffe, love?" asked Mildred of her husband, when he had finished narrating his strange experiences of the last few days, and had received her own in turn. "Why should we not at once depart now that we have our Milly safe and well? I cannot bear a second separation from you, Ray—indeed, indeed, I cannot—and yet I feel that that is what you have in your mind."

"We will not be separated, dearest," answered Raymond, smoothing her dark tresses with his loving hand. "I will be near you to watch over you; you will meet me here every day. But I have a duty to perform in my father's house, which I have too long neglected; I must protect the helpless, and I must punish the guilty."

Very stern and grave was Raymond's voice as he spoke these words, and Mildred trembled to hear it, because she knew what iron resolve that tone expressed. Her husband, so simple, so generous, so open, was about to match himself against the wily Grace.

"Yes," continued he, "I have been selfishly content with my own lot too long. I have suffered my father's son, my only brother, to remain in wicked hands—flattered by false hopes, terrified by false fears—and have never lifted finger to set him free from a captivity worse than that from which I have myself but now escaped. True,

I have not wronged him ; but when I look upon you, my own, my love, I feel pity for him who coveted such a priceless treasure in vain."

"Raymond," answered Mildred hastily, "you do not know how sadly Rupert is changed."

"Yes, dear, I know it. The curse has fallen—alas, poor Rue, poor Rue !" Raymond turned away his face, and was silent for a little, ere he resumed. "I must act *for* him, therefore, and not *with* him, as I had hoped to do. For some base purpose of her own, this woman, who would imprison him at the Dene, without a scruple, seeks to make him appear sane. In a few days, I can collect evidence hereabouts to prove him otherwise. Then he will be removed from her and hers, and put in some fit place, and receive careful tendance, from which may come—who knows ? improvement, cure."

Mildred shook her head.

"At all events," continued her husband, "he shall remain no more with one who only uses him for her own ends. With her, too—a murderess in intention—I have my own account to settle. This letter, in her own handwriting—'*When you have made sure of R.,*' writes she—was found on the dead body of her brother. I will tell her this to her false face, 'That were it not that she was once my father's wife——'"

"No, no," cried Mildred passionately ; "defy her not, dear husband ; let her be. You will fall into her toils yourself."

"I must take my chance of that, wife," answered Raymond cheerfully ; "but since you fear this woman thus, Mildred, I will remove you at once from out of her reach. With the Careys, you and the child will be safe alike from force or fraud ; and when my work here is finished——"

"No, Raymond," cried Mildred firmly. "If we are to be parted from you, I should feel safer here, in the very hold of our enemy, than in any place where, as before, she might suddenly swoop down upon us. The expectation of the peril would be worse than the peril itself. With you without, and our unknown friend, whoever

that may be, within, I shall not feel unprotected ; besides, for a week at least I am safe, for until then I shall not have served this woman's turn."

"Moreover," answered Raymond, "within a week I shall have obtained all that I need in the way of information, as well, I hope, as struck a blow at this evil woman, who is even now, as I have cause to suspect, bringing her base designs to some completion. Nay, do not tremble, my sweet love. How strange it is that you, who are so brave against all else, should be such a coward with respect to Grace Clyffard !"

"I do not fear, dear Raymond—indeed, indeed I do not for myself, no, nor yet for Milly ; while she is in my arms, at least, she seems to be safe, and knowing that I have her to guard, I meet my aunt as the sheep-dog meets the wolf : but it is for *you*, Raymond, for you I tremble."

"You doubt that I have wits to cope with cunning Grace," returned Raymond smiling. "Well, that is true enough. Still, there is something of advantage in a honest cause, and something, too, in this — that the woman deems me dead. She that plays tricks with shrouds, and acts the sacrilegious part of a lost spirit, may yet not be without her own superstitions, Mildred."

"Then why be seen ?" urged Mildred. "If you trust for anything to Grace's ignorance—and oh ! beware how you build on *that* foundation—why show yourself, and run the risk of being recognised ? Would Aunt Grace easily credit that it is your *ghost* which haunts the place, or would it not rather put her on her guard to sift the truth of the story of your death ?"

"You are wise and prudent, dear Mildred ; but you do not remember that I left Clyffe a smooth-faced boy, having scarcely used a razor till I married, while, since I have been imprisoned under Beacon Down, I have become bearded like the pard. Moreover, in the daytime, no one is stirring now about the park, whether from the Hall or the village ; and when the evening comes, I retire to the *Spotted Cow*, beyond the turnpike, where, in return for looking over the contents of my portfolio, the guidman

and his wife entertain me with the country gossip, and all the history of the poor mad squire. They would as soon think of finding a likeness for me to the cow upon their signboard as to Raymond Clyffard."

"Why, the very dog Rufus knew you; and I knew you, Raymond——"

"Yes, the dog and you," interrupted her husband, smiling upon her fondly, "for love and instinct are equally lynx-eyed; but trust me, no one else shall recognise me. And now, dearest, for the present, we must part, lest this attendant of yours become impatient, or even grow suspicious. You see that it is I that am the prudent one. Every day at this same time I shall be within this chamber, having always *Finis Hall* to take to, if any ferret should invade the burrow. If you do not come, I shall conclude you cannot. In the meantime, do not fear. Within the week, or in less time, I hope to discover enough to put a spoke in Madame Clyffard's wheel, that shall mar the smoothness of its running."

With dire forebodings, which, however, she did not express, Mildred held up her child to meet its father's kiss; then turned towards him her own obedient cheek, unstained by tear, and made him loving farewell. Darker and darker grew his form with every footstep that she took with torch in hand, and once she could not forbear from running back and kissing him once more; but at last she tore herself away, and hurried forth to Lucy.

"I am afraid I have been very selfish, and made you wait very long," said Mildred sweetly.

"It did not seem so, Madam, I assure you," replied her attendant. "It is my duty to wait your pleasure; and besides, my brother here has kept me company."

William Cator, who was standing a little behind his sister, leaning upon a gun, regarded his mistress's truant niece with no very friendly eyes. "I am afraid I frightened you, Miss—that is, Madam," said he gruffly.

"Yes," returned Mildred with a steady voice, "I am always frightened at firearms. Please to carry it carefully as we go back."

"I ain't a-going back, Ma'am," replied the other with an unpleasant grin. "There's nothing to do at the Hall, and I can't sleep in the sunlight like the other folks ; so I'm out for a day's pleasure."

"What is your brother going to shoot?" asked Mildred, with a beating heart, of Lucy as they recrossed the park.

"Oh, nothing as I knows of, Madam ; he is no sportsman. He was waiting for you to leave the cave, because he wants to go in there himself to fire the gun off, and try the effect of the echoes. I wonder whether we shall hear them."

CHAPTER XL.

RUPERT'S MAGIC MIRROR.

THE week which Grace Clyffard had meted to her niece as the interval of rest before her day of trial, and that which Raymond also had assigned as the period necessary for the completion of his own designs, had slowly worn away. Every day Mildred had been comforted by meeting with her husband, yet every day cast down by finding him so bent on punishing his wily step-mother. As though, in executing the sacred task of an Avenger, he felt removed from human ills, he seemed to see no dangers in his path, no matter how obvious they might be; and when they were pointed out, made light of them. True, he said, Cator *had* suddenly come upon him in the cave. What then? The man had scarcely ever seen him in his life; was it likely he should identify a wandering artist, who had let his torch burn out in his enthusiastic admiration of the Cathedral Chamber, with dead Raymond Clyffard?"

"But he must have known that you and I were here together," urged Mildred anxiously.

"Yes; but I assured him that, worn out by a long ramble over Ribble, I had been asleep for hours on this yielding sand. The fellow was quite satisfied, I do assure you, love."

Mildred was far from satisfied: but there was something of impatience in her husband's tone she had never

observed before, which cautioned her not to dispute the matter. She had that faculty of knowing where contradiction is hopeless, and argument worse than injudicious, which, in a woman, is so rare. This submission to her husband's opinion begat in time (as it will always do, if, oh wives of England, you would only try it!) a certain confidence in it.

Matters went on upon the fifth night at Clyffe, and stagnated during the fifth day, precisely the same as they had done at first; Lucy continued to be respectful, and even kind; and Mrs. Clyffard, according to promise, kept herself so completely out of her niece's sight, that Mildred lost that sense of insecurity which had taken such complete possession of her upon her arrival, and even began to think that nothing after all might happen worse than had already taken place, until the hour of her release came round. She had taken one of the old books from the library, and contrived by its help to pass a weary hour or two. It was a tale written in imitation of those of the Round Table, about errant knights and captive ladies, and perhaps she found some application in it to her own case, which lent an interest it would not have otherwise possessed. At all events, it so far won her attention as to make her put a slip of paper in the volume over-night to mark her place, and on the morrow after breakfast, she turned to it with some curiosity to see how Sir Eglamour or Sir Bedevire acquitted himself under certain circumstances. As she opened the book, she perceived that the paper which she had left therein was no longer blank, but scrawled over by the nameless friend whose handwriting was now become so familiar to her.

"The hour which you dread draws nigh, but do not fear it. Rupert Clyffard awaits you in the rose-garden, but I shall be there too. It is better to go forth at once and meet him, than that your aunt should send you forth. You must get the paper signed according to her wish. Leave your child within doors, and do not refer to your marriage, if you love your life."

Like some condemned wretch, who, having striven since his sentence to forget his inexorable doom, is suddenly reminded of it when there is not an hour left that he can call his own, so Mildred shivered and sank down in hopeless terror. Why had she lingered in that dreadful house, when escape had so often offered itself? Why cherished the foolish notion that what Grace Clyffard had once designed would not be carried out? Why have promised, no matter in what straits, to play this evil and false part with Raymond's brother? Her husband, indeed, had not said "Nay," but only because he thought to have by this time rendered such an interview unnecessary. Nay, the week was not yet out. It was the morrow which her pitiless aunt had appointed for this dreadful interview. Why, therefore, should she meet Rupert now? Who knew what help or change the next day and night might bring forth? But yet her unknown Well-wisher, whom she had no cause to doubt, advised her to see her brother-in-law at once. And was it not well thus to anticipate the commands of Mrs. Clyffard at a time when, for all Grace knew, Milly was still clasped in her mother's arms?

The windows of the library looked upon the terrace only; but opening one of them, and putting out her head, she could catch sight of the rose-garden, or rather, for it was a sunk square, of any person who chanced to be walking in it. Yes, Rupert Clyffard was there, in the hunting costume he had worn the previous night, walking rapidly to and fro, and cutting at the leafless plants with his whip-lash. He had evidently not been to bed at all. His face, even at that distance, showed as though he had not known rest for weeks; and always, as his hasty steps brought him to the end of his restricted walk, he looked up anxiously towards a window which she felt was that which had went to be her own. He was evidently keeping an appointment, as he thought, with some one who had not yet come. Then it came into her mind that he had made some such appointment with herself in that very place the day previous to her elopement with his brother. Mildred hurried back to her own chamber, and

muttering something of having left her book behind her, put the child into Lucy's arms, and then returned alone. She well knew that without Milly she would never be suspected by her attendant of any attempt to leave the castle.

Rupert was still there, but walking faster and faster, like some poor pent-up animal in its narrow cage. Mildred dared not look again, lest her resolution should give way, but hurried to the western postern, and let herself out. With a firm step, though with a beating heart, she walked along the terrace towards Rupert; but he did not hear her. She would not have used that way had she dwelt in her old room, and therefore he did not look for her in that direction. She had time to observe him thoroughly as he crossed and recrossed the little square. The last time she had beheld him, he had but lately recovered from a long and dangerous illness, but he had then been healthful and well-looking by contrast with his present appearance. His cheeks had fallen in, and were ghastly pale; his thin fair moustache, all unkempt and straggling, hung like hoar frost upon his lip; his hair was white as snow. There was nothing about him of youth or beauty left. But his eyes burned like living coals—so fiercely that Mildred involuntarily stopped as she caught sight of their strange fire. At that moment, he turned and saw her. With a joyful cry, he took the few stone steps that led up from the rose-garden at a single bound, and stood beside her on the terrace.

"At last, at last!" he cried triumphantly. "Ah, Heaven, how I have wearied for you!" He seized her hand; then, as if controlling himself by a strong effort, raised it respectfully to his lips. "You are not yet mine," said he; "I kissed you the other day, and you were angry. That makes me sad, as it pains you, my dearest, to see *me* wrathful. I was wroth just now because you did not come. I thought they kept you from me—she, or they; and that turns my blood to flame. Your own aunt, too, your own mother's sister, else—But there, I am not angry now. I am so happy, Mildred, that all seems like spring."

"It is spring, Rupert."

"Ay, true; spring with *us*, dearest, and with all fond lovers, although to the world who are neither wooed nor wooers, it is still winter. Is it to-day, or to-morrow, that we two marry? See, I have gathered you a posy. Sweets to the sweet, they say. Now, give me one rose back again, that I may put it in my button-hole; or, since it has no blossom, into my bosom. That is where the true roses bud and bloom. But I do not like those black clothes, my darling. Why do you wear them?" Such a chill crept over Mildred at these words as numbed her brain; until that moment, the thought of her being in widow's weeds had never struck her. Fortunately, Rupert answered for her. "It is not fit," he said, "to mourn the dead so long. My father was an old man, too, and old men must expect death; it is the young who shrink from the grim mower. Your Aunt Grace, poor thing, is likely to die early."

"Indeed, Rupert. Why so?"

"Well, that is between you and me and the terrace-wall here. Or, stay; come here into the yew-tree arbour. I will then tell you some news: I will forecast the future. We shall be one to-day or to-morrow; and man and wife should have no secrets. And, by-the-bye, talking of that, I dreamed last night—of all the dreadful dreams—that *you* were married, and to whom, think you? To whom?" They had crossed the rose-garden, and stood in the huge arbour, enclosed in thick and close walls of yew. The madman held her at arm's-length, and griped her hard, but not in anger; he gazed upon her shrinking face with a good-natured smile, as one who asks a riddle. "I knew you would never guess," cried he at last; "for who would ever think of Raymond? And yet, I dreamed that you were Raymond's wife, not mine; and when I woke—now, listen, for this is what I have brought you here for—I saw my own brother's face—— What's that?"

In an instant, the grave and solemn look with which he had spoken the last few words was replaced by one of keen suspicion, then again by one of mocking mirth.

"Ha, ha, my friend ; what ! you are listening, are you ?" Like a boy that plays at hide-and-seek, he ran out of the arbour, and searched it round and round. "Did you not hear a twig snap, Mildred ?" inquired he.

"No, Rupert."

But in the brief space that he had been absent, she had heard something else—a whisper from she knew not whom, and coming from she knew not whence, which said, "Fear not ; you are not alone. Hide your wedding-ring."

"You heard nothing, Mildred ? Good. Your ears are trustworthy, whereas *I* hear so many things ; voices in the night-air, and at all times our wedding-bells. They give me the headache, dearest ; yet, if I heard them not, I should have heartache. 'Married to-morrow, married to-morrow,' is what they are always saying. But why not 'to-day ?'—why not *to-day*, I say ?"

He snatched her little wrist, and squeezed it in his trembling fingers as in a vice. But for the unseen presence of her unknown friend, her power of speech would have frozen as before. As it was, she whispered huskily, "Because we agreed upon to-morrow."

"That's well ; for you never deceived me, Mildred, as one did. That is why your Aunt Grace will never be long-lived."

"Why so, Rupert, since she is a young woman still ?"

"Well, to most persons—to *all*, in fact, *but* you—I should say, that's my secret. There was once a secret kept from me by all the world, and now I have one of my own. You have heard of second-sight ; that is nothing to the faculty which I possess. I can count one, two, three" (he checked the numbers slowly off upon his fingers, but never taking his eyes off hers), "four for certain, and perhaps five living folks ; and I foretell that those persons will all die early, and two of them young. I have seen their faces, still, and pale, and cold. Now, where do you think I have seen their faces ? Come now, guess. It's a brave riddle. Not in the fire, though there

are men's faces there, but those are dead already ; not in the air, though there are faces there too, but those are devils. Let me whisper in your ear, for I hear creakings—on my *razor-blade*. I thought it would astonish you. That has been my magic crystal, my patent foreshadowing looking-glass, for many a day. I bought it with my first money long ago, before I wanted it for shaving. You see I don't shave *now*, because they have taken away my razors, *as they think*, and with them the most gladsome sight that memory or sunbeam have got to show me—the faces of the men I want to kill. They are not all *men*. Look you, for I always carry it about with me—here is a woman's face. Do you not know it ? ”

“Yes, I know it, Rupert ; but you would not hurt me ? ”

She gazed upon the blade, whereon was mirrored a beautiful face indeed—her own—but white with terror, and her lips parted with the beginning of a prayer.

“Hurt *you*, my Mildred ? Nay, I love you so, that while you speak and breathe upon this steel, her hateful features fade away. But now—see—they come again ; the hard blue eyes—the silken mesh of hair in which she trapped my father—the lips that whisper lies—the lily neck that I will squeeze some day. She is blotted out by quite a mist of blood, and then comes Clement—the fat-faced shrinking fool. How that man fears me, Mildred ! I will kill him too, yet not too quickly, but as the cat plays with the mouse. Here's that devil Cator ; now I fear *him*. He has chains about him, whips and locks ; he shut up Uncle Cyril, the only sane man in our family, and then murdered him. Now, for murderers, the law says ‘Death.’ ”

“The law, Rupert ; but *you* are not the law,” pleaded Mildred earnestly. “Yours are wicked thoughts. If you indeed feel tempted to do these people hurt, give *me* the razor.”

“To-morrow, not to-day. Before I marry, I must wipe out old scores. My fear is that, having once begun, there

will be no end ; for No. 4 (I always call him *that*, but he *may* be No. 5) is certain as the rest. You see him, don't you ? ”

“No, Rupert ; I do not wish to look upon that thing again.”

“Ha, ha ! ” laughed the madman softly. “Look at me, then. Here is No. 4. I am short-lived, like the rest. That is why you are wearing widow's weeds already. I thought it was for Raymond. There, I've pained you now. I thought so only in my dream. I dreamed that Raymond married you, and so it happened that this very morning whose face should come out on my magic crystal but poor Raymond's ! But it was dimmer than the rest, and therefore I have my doubts.”

“Would you kill your own brother, Rupert, and ruin your immortal soul ? ” asked Mildred, laying her hand upon his arm, and looking at him with such solemn earnest eyes, that Rupert's drooped their lids.

“Well, as to that,” returned he, stripping the rosebranch still in Mildred's hand of its few leafless twigs, “Grace Clyffard—who is the devil, you know—has promised me that, if I sign a certain parchment, all will be well with me, and safer than any priest could make it.”

“Sign it, Rupert.”

“You say so ? ” exclaimed the madman eagerly. “Then that is enough ; otherwise, because she has plagued me with her ‘Sign, sign,’ ever since—well, since yesterday ; but there's something wrong there—I would never have done it. I will settle that at once ; and would it not be rare to sign it with—— But that's my secret. Have you any other commands, my love, my bride ? ”

“Yes, Rupert. For my sake, I pray you to do no harm to Mrs. Clyffard, nor to any other of those you spoke of. Now promise me, as you are a gentleman.”

“Ay, there's the rub ; some people can make promises and break them, which I never can. Well—I will pro

mise you to sign with ink, not blood, and to let Mrs. Clyffard and the fat-faced fool and Cator live—until to-morrow. Give me your arm.—No, not a day longer.—Hush ! the peacock listens yonder ; he has a thousand eyes to see with, and what he hears he tells ”

CHAPTER XLI.

MILDRED'S FLIGHT.

AFTER parting, she scarce knew how, with Rupert at the west postern, Mildred flew to her own chamber with a mind divided between thankfulness and terror. She was deeply grateful that the dread interview—so infinitely worse than anything she had been prepared for—had come to any end not immediately tragical; while she trembled for the consequences which it foreshadowed. It was clearly her duty to warn her enemy, Grace, of the imminent peril that threatened her, as well as Clement Carr and Cator, at the hands of this unhappy madman. But her own Raymond, although his danger did not seem to be so instant, was to be warned also. What if, after setting her aunt upon her guard, Mrs. Clyffard—having obtained, in the meantime, what she wanted from her unhappy step-son, should put at once into effect whatever design she might entertain against herself and child; or even but make them, for the future, her close prisoners, so that she could not communicate with her husband at all! To be cut off from that comfort *now* seemed, indeed, a thing unbearable. To run the risk, however small, of such another meeting with Rupert, was something too terrible to be thought of. She wondered at herself for having sustained, even with the help of her unknown and unseen ally, so frightful a trial, with sufficient external composure to deceive the cunning madman—if,

indeed, she had deceived him. Might he not even now be committing those very crimes he had spoken of as though they were decrees of fate which he had been appointed to execute! Upon consideration, however, she felt as much conviction as the nature of the case permitted of, that Rupert would keep his promise, and for that day at least restrain his murderous instincts. Once persuaded of this, her resolve was fixed to escape from the walls of Clyffe—from the mad love of Rupert, and the cruel hate of her Aunt Grace—at once and for ever.

Her husband himself had appointed the morrow for the maturing of his plans and her own departure; and now, after what had happened, he would certainly not permit her to remain another night under that hateful roof. She would meet him as usual in Ribble Cave that day, but not to part. They would take Lucy with them—such a confidence had grown up between her and her attendant, almost, as it seemed, in spite of the latter's self—if she feared the wrath of the Mistress of Clyffe, and was willing to change service; but whether Lucy proved to be a consenting party or not, Mildred was resolutely determined to flee. Let her attendant be ever so kind to Milly, and friendly to the interest of herself and child, and let her unknown friend be ever so watchful over their safety, Clyffe was no longer a place for them. With the necessity for flight, there came into her mind as the morning drew slowly on, all sorts of possible impediments and obstructions to it. Contrary to custom, Rupert was up and about that day; might not—nay, if he pressed the immediate signature of this parchment, was not Grace herself quite certain to be stirring likewise? As for the ruffian Cator, he seemed to need rest neither by night nor day, for his grim face was always to be seen where least expected; a cunning look, too, sat on his harsh features, which she did not like. Had Raymond really hoodwinked him so easily as he imagined? If not, then indeed did her husband stand in deadly peril.

Again and again, as the sun lingered on the dial in the courtyard, did she accuse herself (though never her

husband, who was the one in fault) of insensate folly in remaining at Clyffe, when so many chances of escape had offered themselves. In vain she strove to reassure herself by recalling the arguments Raymond was wont to use at Sandby long ago with the same object: the power of the law; the certainty of detection, which must needs deter so acute a woman as her aunt from the commission of actual crime; the ridiculous notion of kidnappings, murders, private imprisonments, and all the stage situations of romance taking place at all in this nineteenth century. This last consideration, so generally popular with persons in commonplace and easy circumstances (who, by-the-bye, read in the *Times* at breakfast, every morning of their lives, some case or other much more tremendous and astounding than any so-called "sensational" novelist would venture to put into fiction), was not so comforting to Mildred as it doubtless would have been had not her personal experience so flatly contradicted it. We have it upon good authority, that the human hand is not the better fitted for a brasier notwithstanding that the mind may be engaged in contemplating the frosty Caucasus; and if all these weighty reasons for entertaining a sense of confidence and security had failed her at Sandby—before the attempted designs of Gideon Carr and the abduction of Milly—it was not likely that they should give her comfort *now*.

When a message suddenly came for Lucy that her mistress wished to see her immediately, and Mildred was left alone, she caught her child up in her arms, and prepared for instant flight. This surely was the time, before some order should arrive from her aunt for her more strict keeping, to cross the solitary park; but even as she hurried on little Milly's out-door garments, she heard Cator enter his own room, the window of which, she knew, commanded the very door through which she must make her exit. Moreover, even if she reached the cave, Raymond would not be there for yet some hours, and her pursuers would be sure to seek for her there before he came, or if not so, to come upon himself, when recognition would be all but inevitable. She had hardly time to

undo her hasty work, and conceal the evidences of her intention, when Lucy returned with a countenance even graver than usual.

"What are my aunt's commands? Tell me the worst! Am I to be more a prisoner even than I am?" cried Mildred, forgetting all her caution in her anxiety.

"No, Madam. It is for myself I grieve, and not for you. My mistress is dissatisfied, it seems, with my attendance on you. I am to serve you no more—or, at all events, not as before."

"Is some one else, then—some jailer—to take your place?" asked Mildred, hanging with eagerness upon the other's answer.

"Not that I know of, Madam. But I am no longer to accompany you in your walks. Since Rufus knows you now, Mrs. Clyffard says it is no longer necessary; but I am afraid she has some other reason."

Mildred's heart bounded within her, and then as suddenly it seemed to stop and die.

"But the child? When I go out, may I take Milly with me?"

"Yes, Madam; I was particularly to say that you were not to be parted from the child."

Mildred took Lucy by the hand. "Do not grieve," she said; "though I leave you for a little, I shall not forget you. God bless you, Lucy; you have been very kind to the friendless and the fatherless—I am sure she wishes us well; is it not so, Milly?"

As the child, for answer, put up its little mouth for its whilom nurse to kiss, the tears rolled down the woman's cheeks; then, as if not daring to trust herself to speak, she withdrew into a distant corner of the room, and took up some needlework.

"I will not press you with questions that may embarrass you, Lucy, or to which it is inconsistent with your duty to reply; but tell me, where is Mr. Rupert?"

"He is with Mrs. Clyffard, Madam."

"Alone?" asked Mildred with apprehension.

"No, Madam. Mr. Carr is with them."

"And your brother—I heard him in his room a while ago—where is he now?"

"I left word with him to join my mistress."

"Do you know what their meeting is about? and may you tell me if it concerns myself and Milly?"

"I think"—the woman stopped and hesitated—"I believe not, Madam. There was something to be signed by the master. But I was to tell you, Madam—at least I was to let you know—that Mr. Rupert would not be about again to-day; and that Mr. Clement and my brother were both bound for Lancaster."

"Why, that almost looks, Lucy, as though my aunt would say, 'The coast is clear, niece; you may now depart from Clyffe, if you have a mind.'"

"Yes, Madam."

"You answer as though you still thought some evil was intended; but I have reason to think that Mrs. Clyffard has obtained all she wants, and would willingly be rid of me. I have had a meeting with Mr. Rupert this morning."

"With Mr. Rupert?" exclaimed the woman, leaping to her feet. "Great Heaven! you have never done that! It would have been safer for you to have met Rufus ere you and he were friends."

"I know it, Lucy. He is mad—and more—he is bent on murder. Let your mistress and her friends beware of him, for he loves them not."

"They will look to that," returned Lucy more quietly; "they are all used to mad folks."

Something in the woman's tone, as well as words, jarred on Mildred's ear, as had often been the case during the first few days of their acquaintance, but not of late. Its effect now, as always, was to reduce Mildred to silence. Presently Lucy left the room, and when she returned, they scarcely interchanged a remark until their midday meal; after which Mildred quietly began to prepare for going out. When she and the child were ready, and about to leave, Mildred said, "Good-bye, Lucy," with a smile, which the other easily comprehended.

"You forgive your jailor, then?" returned the woman

gravely. "For a captive on the day she leaves her prison, that is much to say."

Mildred changed colour.

"Nay, Madam; do not deny it, for I know better than *you* that you will not return. May I kiss the child, please?"

Once more the woman's tears stood out upon her harsh and furrowed cheek like drops of turpentine upon the fir-bark. Then with a parting hand-shake, Mildred departed; along the echoing corridor, down the muffled stair, and so through the great hall into the empty courtyard. There, looking up at the window of the room she had just quitted, she saw Lucy watching them, with her still weeping face pressed to the pane. Mildred paused upon the bridge that spanned the sleeping waters of the moat to wave her handkerchief in farewell; then she turned, and took her way across the solitary park.

Surely she was free now; yet what a weight seemed to oppress her heart and brain! Did her Aunt Grace indeed intend that she should make her escape? or was this fancied freedom but like that of some poor prisoned bird, forgetful of the string that tethers it, who flies a little way from its tormentor, only to be checked at his cruel pleasure, and be put back in cage? If Lucy knew her simple plan, how much more would Grace Clyffard be cognizant of it. Still, here she was on her way to inmost Ribble, and not a creature in sight to stay her. In a few minutes she would find herself in the presence of her natural protector, friend, and lover: clasped to her husband's heart, she would fear nothing. With hands too eager for their task, she lit a torch, and took the oft-trodden way, unmindful of its unsullied glories—though virgin white as ever glistened the pendent crystals; and the fantastic forms that rose to meet them, rough with ten thousand ripples, showed like new-drifted snow. Now on the pebble rang her hurrying feet—now the bare rock gave sullen token of their passage—now the silver-sand received their noiseless impress; then with bent head, whose wealth of hair covered her precious charge as with a silken mantle from the tricklings of the roof, she

threaded the narrow tunnel, at the end of which Raymond had always met her with a cry of welcome, coming from out the darkness of that vast cathedral chamber like a star. This time he met her not. Her torch flashed full upon two human countenances, than either of which she would rather in that solitary place have faced a wolf's.

The one displayed the cruel features of her uncle, Clement Carr, and the other the grim and repulsive lineaments of William Cator.

CHAPTER XLII.

AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE AND ITS PLANS.

As soon as Rupert Clyffard had parted from Mildred, he sent word to his step-mother that he wished to see her upon a matter of the last importance in what he was pleased to term his business-room. Like many another dignified by the same name, or even that more ambitious one, "the study," this chamber gave no evidence of its title in its contents. Formerly, a few of the more faded family pictures, for which even the great gallery had no room, had adorned the walls ; but the present inmate had caused them to be exchanged for the portraits of such of his ancestors upon whom, in later life, the supposed ancestral curse had fallen, or who, in other words, had been "distinguished in eccentricity." Of Guy Clyffard, a full-length had been taken, when advanced in life, attired in his favourite hunting-dress of grey ; and but that Rupert's coat was a red one, the picture in its frame might have almost passed for a reflection of the living man ; so like, as Lucy had said, had the young Master of Clyffe in these late years grown to his strange forefather ; unshorn was *his* long white hair, unkempt *his* straggling moustache, and upon *his* worn cadaverous face dissipation had set the same sad marks which physical and mental illness had imprinted upon the face of his descendant. Rupert's great-uncle, Roderic, too, was there, who had lived and died his own master as well as Master of Clyffe,

but who had yet been mad enough to think he would come to life again to inherit house and land ; the features not unlike those of Ralph Clyffard, but less firm, and not without a touch of cunning. Uncle Cyril's well-known face was the last of that long line, with lips that beamed forth kindness and good-will, as they had ever done on him whom they now looked upon (for he had loved his brother's boys), but with a certain glitter of the eye which boded evil to the man that crossed him. But there was one picture to which Rupert's glance had been directed from the moment he entered the room, and which he was contemplating now, with head aside, while he awaited Mrs. Clyffard's coming—the handsomest face of all, so beautiful and waxen delicate that it might have belonged to some fair girl, save for the silken fringe upon the lip.

"How *could* she have played him false ?" murmured Rupert, his chin sunk on his hand. "With one such as he to love her—and very kind he was, they say, when he was pleased—why did she not then please him ? Why ruffle that broad brow ? Why mar that loving smile ? And he too—why for that fair Jezebel so strangely like——" He heard the rustle of a dress at the open door, but he did not stir a hairbreadth—"so very, very like her portrait."

"You sent for me, Rupert, did you not ?" said Mrs. Clyffard, laying her finger-tips upon his arm.

"Yes, mother—I call you mother because Hamlet did—but *why* I sent for you, that has escaped me altogether. Perhaps it was to ask your opinion about Bertram here. Now, what do you think of him ?"

"Well, he was a foolish headstrong boy, enamoured of a woman false as she was fair."

"How very, very like my father !" observed Rupert.

"Yes, a little like," returned Mrs. Clyffard carelessly ; "they were both dark, and very handsome in their youth."

"But this one was never old."

"No ; he died young."

"Ay, and shut up, poor fellow," remarked Rupert, pitifully.

"The better for him, step-son, otherwise he would have been hanged. Do you not know that for jealousy of that same wanton he slew his brother Gervaise?"

"Ay." Rupert faced suddenly round, and asked with fierce impatience, "But why did he not kill *her* instead? Those cruel eyes of blue, why did he not shut them close? Those lying lips, why did he not make them dumb? Those serpent locks, why did he not take them, as I might yours this instant, and wind them about her snowy neck until she choked?"

Grace Clyffard's face was ashy pale; but her eyes did not quail, nor her voice tremble, as she answered sternly, "Ask her yourself, Rupert; you have seen her once, and will perhaps see her again."

"True, true," stammered the other; "let us not talk of that; I could not bear to see her; it would drive me—I am sure I could not bear it. The last time—I marked it in the almanac here—was the very day of my poor father's death. I wonder whether she appears before all deaths. One, two, three, four—— What are you staring at, mother? Do you not know that I am here to sign the almanac—the thing that you have plagued me to do a thousand times. How does one sign an almanac? Let me write down Cancer for my name, because he was the brave crab that nipped your brother Gideon, and kept him tight till the tide came up, for which I hold him in everlasting honour."

"Do you mean that you are ready to sign the parchment, which you have hitherto refused to do until you are married to Mildred?"

"Just so; it is only to-day instead of to-morrow; why not?"

Grace Clyffard strove in vain to quench the gleam of triumph that stole over her white face, and made her cold eyes glitter with eager greed; but she made answer carelessly, "As you please, Rue; but we must have witnesses, or the deed would only be waste paper. Shall we send for my brother Clement and William Cator?"

"Ay, do," said Rupert slowly. "Give me the deed—you keep it somewhere here, I know—and I will read it

while you fetch these men. One should read what one signs."

From a locked drawer, in a cedar cabinet, Mrs. Clyffard drew forth a parchment neatly folded, and placed it in his hands. It was Rupert's own will, whereby, in case his brother died before him, without issue, all the lands of Clyffe were devised to his step-mother solely. She pointed to the place where presently he was to sign, and where the names of her brother and Cator were to be attached.

"But where do *you* sign?" asked he.

"I do not sign at all," said she.

"But that will not do," cried Rupert; "your name must be set down."

"It *is* set down," replied she impatiently. "There, there, and there again—have you no eyes? I will go ring for Lucy, and she will bring the other two."

"One—two—three—four," observed the madman slowly—"Grace, Clement, Cator, and I. This is to do all our wills in one, then. No. 5 is in it also; but then he never stole my love away, as Gervaise served poor Bertram; that was only an evil dream. Time has not fled, as the whispering fiends would persuade me. All between is but one long, long night. This surely is my own sweet marriage eve."

He took the parchment to the almanac, and compared it with a date marked with a white cross. "Yes, 'tis the self-same day. To-morrow, I wed my Mildred. To-morrow, one goes to the bridal, and three to the bier. Ay, here they come. Now, see me sign, my honest witnesses. Clement the fool, put thy name below here; Cator the knave, write thine beneath it; and as for Grace, the foul fiend with the fair face, as Raymond used to call her—Grace is everywhere, like sin. You do not smile, mother. That is hard, since I have done all this to pleasure you. Now, I go to my bed—By-the-bye," he added, stopping at the door, and looking at her very fixedly, "to-morrow, being Mildred's husband, I shall be your nephew; will that make any difference in one's calculations? One—two—three—four. No; it all comes

out as it should do. But I'll ask my father, nevertheless."

"What does he mean by that?" asked Clement uneasily, and not before the echoes of Rupert's heavy foot-fall, so unlike a young man's tread, had died away down the oaken stair.

"There is no meaning left in him," replied Mrs. Clyffard contemptuously. "I suppose he refers to some ramble on the roof-top which he intends to take to-night, in hopes to meet with poor Ralph's spirit, which forsook him there. I often hear him on the leads above my chamber."

"Hear him! Hear whom?" asked Clement with apprehension.

"Why, Rupert, of course. Do you think that dead men walk?"

"I have heard," returned Clement seriously, "that spirits will sometimes re-enact the self-same scene which was fatal to them, or to those dear to them in this life, and in the self-same place."

"Then you have heard lies, brother, which it is not worth while to repeat. Leave such idle tales to folk like yonder madman. We that have wits must use them to better purpose. Now look you, Clement and Cator, this Rupert Clyffard is growing something worse than intractable; he is getting to be dangerous."

"He has been fit for the Dene this long time," grunted Cator.

"I know *that*," returned Mrs. Clyffard sharply; "and what is worse, everybody about him knows the same. This deed he has just signed would be quite worthless, but for the date, which sets it two years back."

"But is not that for—for—forgery?" stammered Clement.

"No, fool; or if it is, what then? Which of us three would witness against the other? Not I, nor Cator—of that, at least, I am sure; I wish I could say the same of my own kin."

She spoke with such contempt and bitterness, that Clement seemed to shrink within himself, and cower like

some shelterless beast in a storm. "Forgery!" repeated she. "Why, if I could not have got this man to sign, do you think that I would not have written 'Rupert Clyffard' here with my own hand, as like to his as I could make it? Have I gone so far upon my road—and yours—to halt for this or that? Have I done my part, taken my share of risk—ay, and more than my share—that you should stare because I say I would have done this thing? Do you deem that if this madman's wild caprice had not chanced to be thus favourable, or if this Mildred should have failed to make him so to-morrow, I would have sat down submissive, like a perplexed maiden before her embroidery-frame, whereon the pattern has been woven amiss? Do you think that Clyffe and all you see, brother, from yonder window, and thrice as much again, and gold in bank, and coal in Durham mines—read, read! 'tis here!—is all this to be got by me, and shared by you, without suspicion, peril, ay, perchance, and even risk of your own worthless neck? What! think you to make me your cat's-paw—*me!*—and never let your fingers feel the fire, but only itch for what I keep myself, after all's done?"

"I am sure, sister," said Clement doggedly, "I have always wished you well."

"Wished!" hissed Grace. "I wonder that you do not tell me I have ever had your prayers! What have you *done*?—but that you will have some difficulty of answering—come, what are you prepared to do?"

Mr. Clement Carr looked ruefully at his own signature scarce dry upon the lying deed, as though he would have said, "That's not a little risk to run, according to my prudent notions;" but his lips murmured something about his being ready to do anything that was required of him for the common good.

"That is well answered, brother. There is but one thing—and an easy thing—which you can do; and it must be done at once."

"What is it?" asked Clement huskily. "I won't have anything to do with Rupert."

"Of course not, because, as I have said, he has grown

dangerous," returned Mrs. Clyffard scornfully. "No, let Rupert be *my* charge. You will find him quiet and subdued enough to-morrow, thanks to a certain treatment invented by myself, and quite unknown to you wise folks, who make lunatics their study. But with respect to *your* task, brother—you have read this deed?"

"I have, Grace. Rupert leaves all to you without reserve in case of Raymond's death, and Raymond is dead already."

"Yes; but not without issue."

A cold dew suffused the fat face of Clement at these words.

"True," continued his sister, "the land is entailed to male heirs only, and perchance the will might hold; of this I am not sure. But if this child lives—she being Rupert's near and only relative—we should have 'fraud,' or, at the best, 'injustice,' heaped upon us in her name by all. Suspicion would be aroused, investigation instituted, and—all that may follow is written in your tell-tale face, brother."

For the third time in that short space, Clement Carr passed his handkerchief over his clammy forehead.

"Let Cator do it," he stammered.

"Do what?" asked Mrs. Clyffard quickly. "You have not yet heard what there is to do. And besides, Cator has done enough to show himself faithful, risked enough, done all but gained enough. Now, it is your turn."

"I will not commit a——"

"Hush, fool!" cried Grace, holding up a warning finger; "that is not required of you: but you will be what you have been already to-day—a witness. We must make these things sure. I will take no man's word. Gideon's word I did take, but I will take no other's; no, Cator, not even yours."

"Then this is my job, is it, Mistress, and Mr. Clement is to look on?" observed the serving-man sullenly.

For once, Grace Clyffard winced. Her heart was hard as the nether millstone, and she had never felt the sentiment of shame. She could have borne with equanimity the loathing of the entire human family, if only

they were made to fear her ; but something even in her nature shrank from this brutal candour. She could contemplate the frightful crime she had in view with resolution ; she was actually about to speak of the details of its execution ; and yet, when her tool and minister, who, compared with her, was innocence itself, growled forth, " This is my job, is it ? " her very blood seemed to curdle. To order lamb (for the sake of the mint-sauce) is one thing, but to hear the butcher begin to talk about *his* part of the business is another matter, and intolerable to a delicate stomach.

" Pray be silent, Cator—it is your business to listen and to act—if action seems to be absolutely necessary. Perhaps your own acute intelligence, assisted by that of your master here, may devise some less unpleasant means of making this document something better than waste paper ; but a method more safe, more absolutely without peril to ourselves, I do not think that you will hit upon. For listen. Ever since this disobedient girl has been held prisoner here, she has taken it into her head to visit Ribble Cave. Lucy tells me that she does so through some foolish sentiment connected with that—connected with her late husband. It was in that place, it seems, that the minx first drew him on to declare his passion, and laid the foundation of that plot whereby, for a time indeed, she thwarted us, but for which she has suffered since, and is now about to pay the penalty to the utmost. And does not this jade deserve it ? Did I not send for her hither, the orphan of one who did me deadly wrong, and place her higher than she could have ever looked for in her most ambitious dreams ; and would I not have given her a position which any woman in the land might have been proud to hold—let alone a girl like her with nothing but her gipsy face for fortune—and for return, did she not betray me, cross me, and almost—but not quite, not quite, my soft-toned niece—defeat me ? " She spoke with vehemence, and yet as though she held converse with herself alone, making apology for what she was about to do by calling to mind her wrongs ; then suddenly flashing her falcon eyes upon her hearers,

she added with cruel distinctness, "Therefore it seems to me it is most fit that Ribble Cave should be the place of her just punishment, as it was the first scene of her wicked disobedience. However, she daily goes to this cave—she and her child—attended up to this time by Lucy; but to-day Lucy will not go with them. Now, what so likely, what so almost certain, as that this foolish girl, half maddened by her recent loss, and feeding on this foolish fantasy day after day, should end her woe by plunging with her babe in Ribble stream?" She paused, while Clement turned his white weak face towards Cator, which, as if reflecting something of the serving-man's grim strength of purpose, gradually grew firm. He smiled a sickly smile, and murmured, "Good! The thing looks likely, William, does it not?"

"I always said Miss Grace, as was, was a clever woman," growled Cator admiringly.

"I do not speak thus of my own thought alone," continued Mrs. Clyffard. "The extreme likelihood of the girl's committing suicide struck Lucy herself; but for her telling me that she did not think the cave was safe for my niece to visit, perhaps I should never have hit upon this plan. And look you, Clement, she may do it yet. For my part, like all others who hear the news, I shall conclude she did it; and if you and Cator should have reason to think otherwise, I pray you keep it to yourselves." Seeing the serving-man was about to speak, she held up her hand for silence. "I want to hear nothing—nothing. I have no time for talking. Do not suppose that it is you alone who have to act. This parchment being signed—and made by you effectual—I have to do what has been postponed too long already. There has been already much unpleasant rumour concerning Rupert; moreover, I am told that during these last few days there have been inquiries made, and even some attempt at collecting evidence respecting the young master's state of mind. This is dangerous, and the more so since I cannot guess the quarter from which the danger comes. But *now* they shall have evidence enough. They shall no more complain that Rupert Clyffard is suffered to take

his own mad way. The country bumpkins shall no longer stare at his wild doings. That shall be set right this very night."

"What! would you harm him too, Mistress?" inquired Cator apprehensively. "Don't you think that *three* such—ahem—sudden removals within the twelve hours would be a little suspicious?"

"Harm him?" rejoined Mrs. Clyffard contemptuously. "Why should I harm the man? But since he has become impracticable, and can be of no more use to us, it is high time he should be sent to the Dene. We know he will be taken care of by the good folks who have bought the place off our hands. Only he must be a little more ripe for it. But that's my business; do you see about your own. What you have to do must be done to-day. It is time that you should both set forth for Ribble, but not together—nor must either of you be seen going in that direction. You will have to make a long round before you meet. And be sure you light no torch, but wait in the Cathedral Chamber for—for what fate may send you. Remember, Clement, this is the last blow we have to strike, and there is none to ward it; and without it all we have done and perilled has been but labour and risk in vain."

CHAPTER XLIII.

FRIEND AND FOE.

WHEN those two evil countenances met Mildred's terrified gaze at the entrance of the Cathedral Chamber, she mechanically started back.

"No, no, niece," cried Clement mockingly, and interposing his fat carcass so as to shut her in; "you have spent many pleasant hours in this place by yourself, why should you be so anxious to leave it now that you have our good company?"

"By *yourself*! he said," thought Mildred; then this man did not know of her husband's having met her there, and almost certainly, if he did not know *that*, of his being in existence. Was it possible that Raymond had fled at their approach, as he had once done before, into Finis Hall? If not, he must be late, and would presently follow her into the cave. In either case, there was hope of help, which upheld her sinking heart.

"What would you with me, Uncle Clement?"

"Ay, it's *Uncle Clement* now, is it?" returned he with a sneer. "The last and only time we met, it was *Mr. Carr*, forsooth, and your ladyship did your best to be distant. I am not one to forget these things, Mrs. Raymond Clyffard."

"If I was distant to you, Sir, it was not of my own will, but by my aunt's--your sister's--orders. You know that those must be obeyed."

"I do, Niece Mildred. We are here to-day to obey them ; are we not, Cator ? "

Even now, with only a poor shrinking woman and her child to deal with, this man liked to assure himself of a backer ; even now, on the very threshold of his hideous crime, he drew some shabby comfort from laying it at another's door. Histone and manner froze Mildred's blood within her. Rather than appeal to this base wretch, albeit her own kith and kin, she turned to his grim hireling.

"*You*, at least," she cried in piteous accents, "I have never, even involuntarily, wronged. I did not come into the world *your* enemy, born of a hated stock, and yet *your* own. Although you may be rough and rude, you are still a man, and—— I know not what harm may be intended me, and this poor innocent child ; but you will not, surely you will not lend your strength to this unnatural wretch against such foes as we are. Pity us—pity this little one, if such you have at home, and if not, then pity me, for the sake of your own mother."

Not a sound came from the stern lips of the serving-man, but he withdrew himself within the gloom a little, as though ashamed to meet her pleading eyes.

"You dare not look upon my wretched face," she cried, "so much of divine pity dwells within you yet. Oh, let your better nature move you a little further, and——"

"Silence !" cried Clement fiercely. "This is no time for tears and whining. You should have thought of some such hour as this, when in this very place you laid your trap for Raymond Clyffard, and thwarted me and Grace. You have well said that what she orders must be done. She orders this : that never again shall you or that cursed child—but for whom no such fate need have awaited you, and here you see how your punishment again crops out from your own perversity ; I say we are here to see you never more return from Ribble Cave."

"God of heaven ! would you murder us, then ? " exclaimed Mildred, hugging her babe to her fast-beating heart.

"No, niece; not so. We only wish to assure ourselves that yonder stream has taken you both from a world of trouble. As I have said, I am sorry for this necessity, which, however, you have brought upon yourself; but after all, drowning is an easy death, and matters might have been worse—might they not, Cator?"

"Matters might have been worse," returned his grim assistant huskily.

What little chance was left for Mildred now lay, she was well aware, alone in gaining time. Her ears, while they drank in these words of doom, were straining for the echo of a footfall in the tunnel, for a splash in the sullen stream behind her; but she heard nothing save the monotonous "drip, drip," from the limestone roof, and the stealthy flow of the dark tide.

"Why do you appeal to your servant, Sir," cried she, "for sympathy in your premeditated crime, and yet forbid me to strive to move his heart a little—a very little—from its cruel purpose? My child and I—if you only spare our lives—will never more plague you, uncle, nor Aunt Grace; we will leave this place, and take another name, and be as dead. I promise—I swear it."

"So you promised, so you swore, niece, to marry Rupert Clyffard," interposed Clement gravely. "Spare your breath; you might as well attempt to melt with it yon crystal statue as to move Cator, honest fellow, from his duty."

Mildred turned her eyes upon the stalagmite thus indicated, and shuddered to see how like it looked to the thing which it was said to be. A mother and child had already perished in that very spot; was it possible that she and Milly would be slain there also? Because the place was hidden from the light of heaven, was it also hidden from its Lord? She prayed with dumb white lips that He would prove it otherwise, and that right speedily. It was now long past the usual time of tryst with Raymond, and of human aid Mildred began to despair.

"Come," resumed Clement, impatiently, "let us have done with this. If, as you endeavour to persuade us, you

would lay no claim on your child's account to Clyffe, or aught belonging to it, were you suffered to live on, what advantage would there be in such a life? Why wish for mere existence, without a single possession that makes it dear? You are widowed, and poor, and friendless. What years of wretchedness, and, like enough, of shame, would there be in store for your helpless girl. Many a woman has ended life for less valid reasons; and *you*—I tell you, you *must* die, whether or no; so why not save *us* the——”

“What!” interrupted Mildred, passionately, “would you slay my soul as well as my body? Would you drive me to commit a deadly crime, in order to flatter yourself that you did not do it with your hands? No—villain, butcher! if you work your wicked will it shall not be with my help. If I die, it shall be murder, and no suicide; and my child—— Oh! spare the child, good Cator!” she broke forth. “Drown *me*, if it must be so. I would rather that thou didst it, than to feel the fingers of that hateful wretch, whose blood is mine, press down my head beneath yon dark cold stream. But save my child; if thou art born of woman, save my child!”

“Take hold of her, Cator. Damn her, how she screams—these echoes make as though it were fifty women. Take hold of her, and put her under, since she wishes it, and leave the child to me.”

“To save?” cried Mildred, clinging to this straw. “Will you indeed save my child? Oh! do not mock me on the verge of death, but promise me that, though I drown and die, my girl shall live unharmed. God will protect her, though, alas, alas, He seems to have forsaken *me*! No one need ever know whose child she is. Good Clement, do you promise?”

“Ay, ay,” returned Clement gruffly—“give me the girl.”

“Give her *not* to him!” broke forth a terrible voice, at whose fierce tones the very cavern seemed to tremble. “Let not his murderous fingers touch her innocent head! Oh! liar, cursed for ever, if but for that one lie! Thine hour—and mine—has come at last.”

Not a footstep had fallen upon the cavern floor, not an arm had parted the watery path from Finis Hall ; and it seemed to Mildred as though heaven's own thunder had spoken. Indeed, such power and fury were in the sound that it did not appear like human speech, and not until William Cator gave one stride from out the gloom, and seized her uncle by the throat, did she recognise her ally in the serving-man. As for Clement Carr, his surprise was greater than her own—so stupendous that it even overwhelmed for a moment his naturally acute perception of personal danger.

"What *are* you about, man? What *do* you mean? Are you mad or—— Oh!"

Here the windpipe of Mr. Carr became too rigidly compressed to admit of further gurgling.

"Please to bring the torch here, Mrs. Raymond Clyffard," said Cator hoarsely, "that this fellow and I may look at one another."

Mildred obeyed mechanically, and threw the full glare of the pine-branch upon the two struggling figures, if struggling they could be called when the one was incapacitated from standing, and at the same time prevented from falling by the strong, firm clutch of the other. Clement's face, compressed, purple, with the eyes dilated, from which, as it seemed, the wicked cunning had scarce had time to escape, and give place to abject fear, was a ghastly sight enough ; but that of Cator was far worse. Always grim and forbidding, the countenance of the serving-man was as disturbed by mental passion as was that of his master by physical violence ; an inextinguishable hate flamed forth from every feature.

"He is not dead, Mistress," said he, in answer to Mildred's terrified glance, and relaxing his grasp a little. It is hard to let go of such a throat as his, but I should have been loath to kill him that way ; he has got to hear something first. Here, smell to this." He seized the torch, and dashed it into Clement's face, so that it singed his hair and eyebrows. "There, that revives him wonderfully ;" and indeed, under that

novel application of the burnt feathers' system, Mr. Carr began to show signs of animation. After a prolonged fit of sneezing, he proceeded once more to articulate his opinion that his serving-man was either mad or drunk.

"You see he can't believe it, Mistress!" cried Cator triumphantly. "He can't believe that, after so long a servitude to him and his, one *could* remain an honest man!" Then, pointing to his late master with a finger that quivered with passion, he ejaculated, "Thou murderous brother—thou twin-Cain—how I do hate thee! Dost thou think because I delay to smite thee, or because I loosed my hold just now, that there is hope for thy base life? There is no hope, no loophole for escape the size of a needle's eye! Clement Carr, thou art come here to die!"

"You would not murder me, honest Cator—me who have been your master for ten years—and for no reason."

"Hark to him, Mistress!" laughed the other scornfully. "Listen to his whining prayer! He talks of murder—he that came hither to do a double murder—as though it were a crime. 'My master for ten years,' and 'for no reason,' sayest thou? Why, is not that a reason good enough, if there were no other? To live for ten long years the minister of thine accursed will—the instrument of villainies unspeakable done upon friendless creatures, chained and starved——"

"That was Gideon's doing," broke in the abject wretch: "you know I always said that he was too hard."

"Yes, and strove to make him harder. I say nothing for *him*; sooner or later, he would have met his doom at these same hands (as thou art going to do), had not Heaven itself, impatient of his crimes, cut short his course; but he at least was open in his wickedness, and met his death, I doubt not, fearless, as the better sort of vermin do. But thou—thou fox without the fox's courage, thou hypocrite—thou wilt drown yonder! Why dost thou shudder so? thou that has just been saying what

an easy death it is to drown ! Thou wilt die, I know, a coward's death ; calling on the God in whom thou hast no faith, and thinking to move me with thy lying words —*me*, a man, thou hast well said, as easy to move from his fixed purpose as yonder crystal statue is to be melted by the breath ! ”

“ Why should you kill me ? why should you do me hurt ? ” cried Clement, fawningly, and almost grovelling at his foeman's feet.

“ Because—— ” began the other, sternly, and gazing straight before him with grave eyes, like one who calls up the past.

“ Cator, beware ! He has got a knife,” cried Mildred, suddenly, and not too soon.

Clement had drawn a weapon from some hidden pocket, and struck with it at his enemy with all his force. But warned by Mildred's voice, the other leaped aside, unharmed, and the next instant Clement's wrist was hanging loose and useless, and the shining blade whirled through the air, and clove the hurrying stream with sullen plash. Clement Carr uttered one yell of pain and baffled fury, then sent forth shriek on shriek of frenzied terror, as Cator dragged him by the neck to the bank of the dark river. Entreaties, curses, and the vilest words that he could coin, flowed from his livid lips, and among them “ Coward, coward ! ”

“ Why coward, Master ? ” asked the other, contemptuously, as he brought his victim, pale and breathless, and almost a corpse, to the very brink, whence they could see the tide glide by as black as ink, to the natural archway, where it vanished suddenly. “ Why coward, my friend of the knife ? My plotter against mother and child of your own kin, why coward, I say ? ”

“ Because my wrist is broken, and you have got two hands to my one,” cried Clement, viciously.

Cator laughed long and loud ; then sternly answered, “ Cunning to the end ; false to thy latest breath. What advantage that ever offered itself in all thy treacherous life seemed to thee too base and mean, if it did but gain thine end ? Nevertheless will I be fair even to thee ;

see, I will use my left hand—only my left—to match with thine : thou wilt be a little longer drowning, that is all. Yon knife-work made me hasty, else I did not mean to slay thee quite so soon.”

“Do not slay him,” broke in Mildred, earnestly, and not for the first time by many ; but her appeals had been disregarded hitherto by her strange ally, and perhaps unheard in his haste and passion.

“Then, since you wish it, Mistress, he shall live—almost a quarter of an hour—and listen to the tale I meant to tell him, from the first, before I send him hence to join his brother Gideon in the pit of Tophet.”

CHAPTER XLIV.

CATOR'S RECOMPENSE

"My story is not short," began the serving-man; "and lest this posture, with my fingers twisted in thy neck, should weary thee, my Master, thou shalt lie down—so. Now, with my foot upon thy chest, so as to feel thee safe, and ready to squeeze thy life out, like a worm's, shouldst thou show sign of movement, thou shalt hear me out. Two score of years ago, and more than that, my mother—Heaven rest her soul!—was coming across this hill that lies above us with a great burden. We had been wealthy once—or what seemed so to yeomen folk like us—but we had gradually grown poor. The house had lost its natural head, and though our mother did all she could, and more than her strength warranted, to keep want from us, it was coming with sure foot. She was returning from market, and having sold what she took, was bringing back some household matters of which we stood in need. A good mother, and a brave one, and if there be anything of goodness or courage left in me, this villain's servant for these ten years past, I owe it to *her*."

As the man said these words he doffed his cap, and over his rugged face a look of loving reverence crept, like sunshine on a weather-beaten wall.

"It was spring-time then as now; not such a spring as comes to Sandby, Mistress; but what we northern

folk are used to : rain, and sleet, and cold, and on the mountains mist a'most as dark as night, and more misleading. Our mother lost her way, and wandering from what little track there was, plunged into what we call a turbary, or morass ; not dangerous to strong and active persons in the daytime, but to her, fatigued and overburdened, and not knowing where to turn, most perilous. There, almost exhausted with vain efforts to escape, Ralph Clyffard, now among the saints in heaven, found her. The late master, in his youth, was ever roaming over the Fells alone, although no sportsman, and he knew them as well as any shepherd. Not only did he rescue my poor mother, but finding her half dead, bore her in his own strong arms to our very cottage-door. When we had heard from her own lips what the young Master of Clyffe had done for her and us—and never shall I forget the loving care with which he brought her in, and bade us tend her well, for that he knew himself what it was to lose a mother—she called both me and Lucy to her bedside, and bade us swear, so long as her memory should be fresh and dear to us (as it is to this day, God knows), to serve the Clyffards, mad or sane, to the utmost of our power. We did not need the oath to make us theirs ; but they were rich, and in no want, at that time, of such help as we could give them. Years rolled on, and I dare say the Squire forgot his good deed as well as those whom it had so benefited ; but *we* did not forget, although we had laid our mother in her grave. But a time came when out of the curse of the Clyffards fell an evil upon them even worse than it—the Carrs.

“ I beg your pardon, Mrs. Raymond, and not for this alone. I know that I have seemed discourteous and unmanly to you many times : of late, as you shall hear, I have been so for your own sake, and the sake of that dear little one, whose grandsire saved my mother's life ; but when I saw you first, the niece of that fiendish woman, of the ruffian Gideon, and of this reptile whom I have here beneath my foot, I gave you neither reverence nor

respect ; an evil seed, I thought, could but bring forth evil fruit. You do not know, nor will I vex you by a recital of them, how hateful were the deeds of your kith and kin. I had heard of them, though dimly, but what I heard fell far short of the hideous truth ; and when Squire Cyril was taken to the Dene, I volunteered to accompany him as his body-servant. There I did what I could for him, poor fellow, and for the rest of the wretched creatures in that loathsome place ; but to all seeming I was as bad, or worse, as its master Gideon, or as this—— Ah ! you begin to wriggle, my friend, do you ? I thought this would be bitter news.”

“ Yes, I played the fiend to please the devil ; and I did please him ; won the confidence of both these villain brothers, and even of their wily sister Grace. Yes, Mr. Clement, Miss Grace as was is doubtless a clever woman, but my deep hate overcame her cunning. I need not tell you how you starved and tortured Cyril, and how at last Gideon slew him, in self-defence, as you would wish to say, if I would let you speak ; but Cyril would never have attacked him, but that he was driven to it (as any man, sane or mad, would have been) by his brutal treatment. Before that time I had been an unwilling witness to the wiles of Grace, and saw her capture in her toils the good kind master in his old age and gloom. This I could not prevent, nor even attempt to do so without risk of a discovery which would destroy my usefulness ; and I perceived that I should be wanted yet to shield poor Mr. Rupert, whom never shall the Dene receive within its cursed walls, although your sister counts upon it with such sureness. I could not then foresee that I was also fated to be, thank Heaven ! the guardian of Raymond’s wife, and of his child—the last of all the Clyffards. But when Grace became Mistress of Clyffe, her ambition increased with her new station, and all that thwarted it she was resolved to sweep away. I need not say what an unexpected obstacle occurred in your own marriage with Mr. Raymond. Her fury, when she found her niece had fled with him she hated most of all the Clyffards, was something worth beholding ; and when I

saw it, then for the first time I began to like you, Mistress, as I never thought to like a Carr. Then I resolved to shield you also—being Raymond's wife and Grace's foe—from every peril which I could avert. When, after finding out where you had hid yourselves, your husband's death was plotted by his step-mother and her two brothers—of whom this wretch alone survives to pay the forfeit—I was privy to their plans. It was I who accompanied Gideon Carr, under his assumed name of Stevens, to Westportown as his servant, and strove to put you on your guard—in vain. I was and am that well-wisher from whom you heard so often without ever guessing, up to this last hour, who that friend might be. I was not indeed in time to save your husband's life—the bridegroom of two years—the father of yon helpless child—your only friend on earth——”

Here Clement made some movement on the sand.

“What, villain! doth that please thee? Darest thou to triumph thus, that art so near to the very gates of hell? Before thou goest there, I have a message for thee for thy brother's ear—*Raymond Clyffard is not dead!*”

An inarticulate cry like that of a wild beast in pain broke from the lips of the prostrate man. “It is false!” cried he. “He fell fifty fathoms sheer upon the sea-beach, and tosses now beneath the depths of ocean.”

“Thou liest! Silence, devil! He did *not* fall. He is alive, and at Clyffe. This very hour he stands face to face with thy vile sister, and she too is under foot. But we all thought him dead, as thou dost; and I took the child away, and brought her hither, to keep under my eye and Lucy's, lest thy brother should slay her too. But that God's vengeance overtook him in the very act, he would have drowned her, and the mother likewise, even as I will now drown thee. Answer me not, or I will beat thy teeth in with my heel. The pent-up rage of half a score of years longs to be loose. There, let that quiet thee!”

“Spare him, for God's sake, spare him!” cried Mildred passionately, as Cator's iron-bound boot crashed in the wretch's mouth, and ground him in the sand.

"Yes, Mistress, I will spare him—but only for the devil's sake, who is going to have his company—for five minutes longer. Where were we, Mr. Clement, when you were so indiscreet as to interrupt? Ah! I remember. I brought the child to Clyffe, as being the safest place, since I was there; and when Grace sent for you, Madam, I likewise wrote to bid you come, for I knew that I could manage her and Clement single-handed. Night and day I have watched over you and your little one ever since you set foot in Clyffe. When you came thither I thought that I alone was left to guard you; but on the second day I recognised your husband in his artist's dress. Yes, Clement; the man Grace spoke of so carelessly a few hours back is her deadly foe, and by this time she feels it. I was close by when Rufus knew his master, and thereby told me who he was. My gun was in my hand that morning, Mistress, you remember; that was to slay the beast, if it had chanced to dislike you. When you had left this cave I entered it, and made myself known to your husband, but bade him keep my secret, even from you. That was cruel, I know, but it was necessary. If once you felt that you were safe and among friends, your manner might have altered, and the crafty Grace have suspected something amiss. The cloak of guile I have worn these many years has become so natural that you could never guess me aught but the knave I looked; but Lucy—it was hard for her, whose heart is kind and true, to pretend hardness, when it yearned towards the babe and you. In case you did not get poor Mr. Rupert to sign the paper, Grace might have struck some sudden blow in wrath, such as I could not ward; therefore I brought about your interview with him a day earlier than the time appointed. The signing of that deed with its forged date has brought this woman within our power to punish or to banish from Clyffe for ever——"

"I will witness against her," interrupted Clement eagerly, though with speech half-choked with sand and broken teeth. She was always a self-seeker—

Grace. I will do my duty, I will indeed, good Cator, though she *is* my sister."

The serving man withdrew his foot in haste, as though the very contact of his heel with such a loathsome wretch had been pollution; and Mr. Carr, feeling his lungs once more in play, continued to improve the occasion.

"My testimony will be really most important, if you will only let me give it. I have known Sister Grace so long. She has never behaved to me as a sister should, I'm sure; nor would she ever listen to my advice. 'These plots of yours,' I have said again and again—you will do me justice so far, Cator—are bad, and very discreditable."

"No, Master—are fraught with too much danger.' That was the line you always took. Do you think to deceive *me*, of all men? No. Those who know you not may, indeed, perhaps credit your damned hypocrisy; but they shall never have the chance. Out of the talons of the law thou, reptile-like, might'st haply manage to wriggle, but out of *my* clutch thou shalt never creep. If there is good enough in thine evil heart wherewith to frame one brief prayer, though, methinks, I might weave rope from out this sand as easily, make it, frame it. I would I could say, 'God forgive thee!' but I cannot."

"Will God forgive *thee*, Cator, who thus takest the law into thy violent hands?" said Mildred solemnly.

"I will take my risk of that, Mistress. I have seen too much of wrong and woe worked in this world to trust to law for righting it. Leave me to deal with this fellow; it is not a scene for woman's eyes. Art thou ready, wretch? It is thy time for drowning, Carr."

With a great effort Clement Carr managed to seize Mildred's garment by the hem, and to that clung, in spite of Cator's efforts to unloose his hold.

"Then must I use my other hand," quoth the serving-man grimly, "for drown thou shalt."

"Oh! Mildred, good Niece Mildred, my own sister's child, will you see me slain before your eyes?"

"Cator," cried Mildred passionately, "forbear, for-

bear! For my sake, for whom you have done so much, I pray you spare him."

"I can *not*, Mistress. I dare not let slip this precious time, for which I have been longing through years of basest servitude, as Jacob longed for Rachel. This is my sole reward."

"He has been paid, Niece Mildred," gasped the wretched Clement—"paid well and punctually—while during these late months——"

"Yes, I have been paid," broke in the other fiercely, "but every guinea, every shilling of it lies unspent, untouched, as though it were indeed that price of blood you dreamed it was. They bribed me with their gold to aid the murderer Gideon against thy own husband, Mistress. Will you say spare him now?"

"Yes, yes," cried Mildred earnestly, "and for my husband's sake—for his child's sake, whose innocent name will else be smirched for ever by this direful deed! The records of her house are stained enough already with blood and violence. I charge you, for her sake, the last of that ill-starred race to which you owe such loving fealty, to spare this wretched man."

"Mistress," rejoined Cator sternly, and still keeping his gripe of Clement's throat, "ere I entered this place to-day, with yon base villain, bent upon sweeping your two innocent lives from his foul path, as he had already swept your husband's, I resolved within myself that never again should his vile body come between the sunlight and the earth, nor wind of heaven be polluted by touching it. No fitter grave, thought I, can it surely find than that black stream, fleeting; no man knows whither, into the darksome hollows of the earth."

"Save me, Niece Mildred—save me!" broke in the shrinking wretch. "I am your own mother's brother."

"Moreover," continued Cator, "I made oath this morning, while this oily slave was compassing your deaths, that never more should Raymond Clyffard's eyes rest on the would-be murderer of his child and wife. I swore it before Heaven."

"They never *shall* rest on me," pleaded Clement pas-

sionately ; "I will leave Clyffe, England, Europe, instantly. They never *shall* rest on me, upon my sacred soul."

"Upon your *what* ?"

"Then, look you, Cator," continued the abject wretch, "if you don't believe my solemn—nay, pray have patience with me—— If Raymond ever look upon me more I give you leave to slay me on the spot, to stab me, shoot me, cut me off by swiftest poison."

"Thou giv'st me *leave*?—and *poison*? I tell thee, Clement Carr, if I do not drown thee now, and ever again I even so much as *hear* of thee, then straightway will I seek thee out, with Rufus, and the hound shall tear and eat thy living limbs. Or if I come upon thee suddenly, alone or in the tumult of the streets, I care not how or where it is, that instant will I clutch thee by the throat, and it shall be thy last. Off! No words; let me not hear thy whining voice again. Off to yon corner of the cave, and hug thy life, spared at the prayer of her thou would'st have slain. If mine eye light on thee again, if mine ear hear thee, it were better for thee to have been drowned in Ribble."

Upon his knees, half dead with pain and fear, Clement Carr dragged himself away, like a scotched snake, out of the range of the torchlight.

"Mistress," continued Cator in changed and quiet tones, "you have robbed me of half the recompense for which I have toiled these ten years. Let us now to Clyffe, where I trust the other half at least awaits me."

CHAPTER XLV

THE LAST OBSTACLE REMOVED.

CHILL night had fallen upon Clyffe Hall, and with it for once repose. The master did not take his untimely sport, and hound and hunter stood with pricking ears, that listened for the horn in vain, in kennel and stall. A sudden change, Grace had caused it to be said, had come over his wild and wayward brain; and evidently a change for the better. Still there was danger in it. The lull might grow to long and settled calm, or it might end in storm. Let all about him be kept quiet. The household must retire to rest, as though the hours of darkness were its accustomed season; let no lights be shown. Mrs. Clyffard herself had set the example by retiring early, and in her own bed-chamber the lamp was quenched. She had neither sent for Clement nor Cator to inquire how their mission had ended, and had studiously avoided that portion of the house which Mildred and her child were wont to occupy. She felt no sting of conscience for the deed which she had ordered to be done that afternoon, but it haunted her brain uneasily. Her purpose was as firm as ever, but not her mind. She had been wont to look as calmly on her past with all its blots, as on the future with its stubborn obstacles, and the means which it was necessary to use (for so she reasoned, apologetic in spite of herself) to over-

come them. But now she shrank from retrospection, and indeed from thought of all kind that was not relevant to the act before her. The wicked who have wickedness upon hand are so far fortunate; it is when they have gained all they have so fondly aimed at that their worst punishment begins. Grace Clyffard, notwithstanding that she had steeped her soul in guilt, had as yet gained nothing. While Rupert lived, and was at large, she had laboured in vain. Her heart was weary of deceit and crime! She longed, almost as the penitent, for peace, for the hour when there should be no further need for lies, demanding such continuous care in act and speech, and for violent deeds, from which anxious risk was so inseparable.

"But one more crime," thought she—as though one launched upon a *glissade* in the Alps, and bound for a *crevasse*, should say, but one more slide—"and then my path is plain and level to the end. While this hair-brained fellow dwells here, I can never feel the Mistress of Clyffe Hall. Why should I wait until his madness is full-blown? What sanity he has but shows itself in sly suspicion, which itself is dangerous to me, or else in open hate." It was strange that she should thus excuse herself for what she was about to do, since she had done such far worse deeds than that which she now contemplated upon the road to her yet unreachd goal; but such was the case. Perhaps it was that Rupert had been his father's favourite son: and certainly the nearest approach to remorse which she had ever experienced had touched her with respect to her treatment of Ralph Clyffard, the man that had so deeply loved her, if after a somewhat doting fashion. In her scheme against Raymond, she had strengthened the triple brass about her heart by calling to mind his disobedience to the old man's wishes, as she chose to consider that half promise she had extorted from him about Rupert's marriage. Raymond had robbed his brother of the bride which his father, as well as Grace herself, had destined for him; Raymond, too, had so little reverence for the things the old man had held sacred, that it would have vexed

him to have seen him rule at Clyffe. But Rupert, by no jesuitry of even her subtle brain could she justify her present purpose against *him*; nay, there was something peculiarly abhorrent in it, inasmuch as it had for its object the very catastrophe the fear of which had embittered Ralph's whole life. In order to overthrow his son's already shaken intellect, she was about to employ the self-same cruel weapon by which she had done to death, although inadvertently, his father.

She knew that none but Raymond, and probably Mildred, had been aware of her having played the part of the Fair Lady of Clyffe. Rupert himself most certainly had no suspicion of it; and although he had of late become such a dare-devil in some respects, he still, she knew, retained his superstitions. It was not uncommon with him, when he did not hunt, to pass many hours of the night upon the roof of Clyffe Hall, in order, as he had told her with bated breath, to consult his father's spirit, which roamed about the spot where he had died, on matters of importance. That very day, he had announced his intention of so doing, and ever since nightfall, Grace had been waiting for him there, attired in her old disguise. Crouching in an angle of the central tower, in her dark and shapeless dress, with her long hair streaming about her shoulders, and in her hand a shroud, or what appeared to be so, she looked, indeed, in the sickly light of that crescent moon, a spectre fit to imperil the reason of the bravest and most sane. Tarrying so long alone, in the very spot where Ralph had perished at her hands, as much as though she had driven a dagger through his heart, had tried even *her* nerves, and her face was worn and haggard with that fearful watch. The night-wind, too, from off the wastes of Ribble Fell, blew full upon her, and chilled her blood, not only with its cold, but with many a strange and stealthy sound; putting shrill voices into the gargoyles' mouths, that seemed to mock her, even when dumb; using the water pipes as speaking-trumpets through which to tell the household where the mistress was; and hurrying the blanched and withered leaves of autumn along the leaden roof, like some great

company of ghosts without a burial-place in mother-earth, who run to meet grim Charon at his every ferry, only to be denied the wished-for passage.

At last she hears a door open and then shut, and in the haste and violence of the action, recognises Rupert's hand. He can now do nothing slowly or with care. To think, to speak, except by impatient unconnected snatches, has long been difficult for him, but of late his very actions have become hurried. For a moment he stands irresolute, and throws a hasty glance in the direction of the sky-light, by which his step-mother stands hid; then falls to pacing rapidly to and fro along the eastward leads. These are fringed by a low parapet of stone, beside which, ever and anon, he pauses, and looks down upon the rose-garden, which lies, though at a great depth, just underneath. Upon either side of it spreads the stately terrace, and below the sloping lawn, ringed by the moat, here shining like ebony in the moonbeams, there lustreless as a pall beneath the overshadowing bank. Beyond, the wooded park, with many a hollow and knoll, blends southward with the rich and teeming lowlands, and on the north, creeps half-way up the base of the barren Fell. But, for Rupert Clyffard's eyes, though bright and even piercing, nature has neither charm nor awe; and yet there is speculation in them too. He is never tired of counting on his fingers one, two, three, and four, and at the fourth he seems to measure the distance from where he stands to the rose-garden below. "There I beheld her first," he says; "down yon stone stairs, which ever since have seemed like altar-steps. Grace led her by the hand towards me, as the brier brings forth the rose. There was our trysting-place, and there—yes, there—beneath the roses, will I lie when all is over. After life's fitful fever, men sleep well, 'tis said—I hope so, for I have need of a long rest—and where so well as in the spot hallowed by their most sacred recollections? What is the chapel to me, or I to the chapel? Let Guy and Bertram, Roderick and Cyril, sniff the odour of sanctity—they like it; it smells in *my* nose like dead men's bones. Give *me* the odour of rose-leaves——"

“Rupert Clyffard !”

The young man turned, and beheld the boding phantom of his house standing close beside him. With a cry of terror he threw up his arms, stepped swiftly backwards, and in an instant had toppled over the low parapet ; but even as he fell, that instinct which, unlike our fair-weather friend reason, remains with us till death, made him catch at the stone coping, where with both hands he hung. Grace slowly thrust her white cold face above the balustrade, and then withdrew it hastily, terrified to see him so near, striving with feet and fingers, whom she had thought by that time to be lying far below, and past all strife ; yet not so hastily but that his upturned gaze met hers, and recognised her wicked eyes.

“One, one,” cried he, and with a frantic effort, such as a sane man could scarcely have put forth, drew himself upward to the parapet itself and clutched it with nervous gripe. Upon his holding fast the issue of another life than his depended. If once he reached the top, not all the subtlety of Grace’s brain could have prolonged her life five minutes. She knew it well ; she read it in the hungry looks which, even in that mortal peril, craved for vengeance rather than for safety ; she heard it in the deadly menace of his “One, one, one,” reiterated with frightful hate and vehemence, and yet as though it were her knell of doom. Grace had never meant to take his life, but only to rob him of what little store of reason yet remained to him. His falling backwards was an unforeseen mischance ; but now that it was a question of his life or hers, she was not one to hesitate. She threw herself at once upon his clutching fingers, and with the force and fury of a wild cat, strove to unloose their hold.

“Fiend, liar, whom now I know, but you shall pay for this !” shrieked Rupert, breathless with rage, at least as much as with his ceaseless struggles. “I will spoil the face of this fair lady as sure as I wear nails.”

“Not so,” hissed Grace, as one by one she tore his bleeding fingers from their hold.

“What ! you are stronger than I ?” laughed Rupert harshly ; “then I go to the rose-bed a day sooner, that

is all." Yet, with a madman's cunning, even while he spoke he exchanged his clutch of the stone for her own flesh. "You see I have your hand now, Mrs. Grace. Since we are about to part, you must let me kiss it."

But with a cry of terror lest he should bite it through, Grace snatched it from his now feeble grasp, and he fell swift and sheer upon the gravel walk which he had so often paced that very day, and lay there motionless.

"He sought his doom," murmured Grace, huskily, as she once more peered over the balustrade. "He drew his death upon himself, and perhaps it is better so. How strange that he should have met the self-same fate as——"

Here she stopped, and turned, and listened, with her hand upon her heart, to still its rapid throbbings. Up the private stairs close by, which led from her late husband's room to the roof-top, there was a hurrying step, whose every footfall struck her with unimaginable terror. Grace knew the step of a foe as another woman recognises that of her lover. It was a swift and vigorous stride such as she well knew had belonged but to one man in Clyffe Hall—and he was dead!

CHAPTER XLVI.

RUPERT'S LEGACY.

WHEN fear does come upon the constitutionally bold, it is overwhelming indeed. The timid fleeth at the shadow of the coming peril, whereas the brave man stands his ground until the substance is close upon him, and it is too late for flight. When a panic seizes a fighting regiment, the ruin is more complete than in one unused to war, which breaks and scatters at the first onset, and rallies again without much sense of having been beaten. In infancy, the measles are lightly caught and easily got rid of ; but when they do seize upon the adult, the case is severe in proportion to its rarity. Through life, Grace Clyffard had been almost void of fear ; not so much from natural courage as from the possession of one engrossing idea—her own personal aggrandisement—which had left no room for it. When the mind is resolutely fixed upon one object, it is callous to influences which would otherwise grievously affect it ; but when these rise beyond a certain limit, it is none the stronger for having hitherto ignored them.

Except in the case of Raymond, when he stood by the couch of his dying father, and regarded his murderess with such vengeful eyes, we have never seen Grace Clyffard tremble, save with rage : but the events of the last month, occurring as they did after two whole years of anxiety and self-repression, had made themselves felt

within her nevertheless. The violent death of her hated step-son had been eagerly desired, and the news of its accomplishment greedily welcomed; the destruction of his wife and child had been coolly planned, and executed (as she thought) without costing her a pang of remorse. When she looked down but a few moments back, on Rupert's inanimate body, as it lay in the moonlight, with a broad streak of red athwart the white shut face, she had involuntarily uttered a sigh of relief, as one might do whose toilsome task is over at last, and who has only to reap the reward. All these terrible occurrences, in short, had been shocks which she had survived, but by no means with unimpaired powers of resistance; and like a bridge which has bravely borne some tremendous test of its strength, her mind stood firm, but vastly weakened by the ordeal. Her physical powers, too, had been severely tried. Appetite had long deserted her, and the snatches of sleep which were still vouchsafed to her scarce brought any rest for dreams that were a kaleidoscope of her plots and plans by day. She had suffered more than she dared to own even to herself during her late lonely watch upon the roof-top; nothing but the reflection that what was about to be demanded of her was the last service which her pitiless spirit would require of her failing strength—after which should surely succeed unbroken repose and ease—had kept her to her post, the very spot where the only fellow-creature who had ever loved her had so miserably perished, and she waiting there to accomplish the mental ruin of his beloved son. She had gone through with it all, and more; for was not Rupert's blood upon her hands? And now, when mind and body were alike exhausted in the dread removal of that last obstacle, and craving for the rest which had been promised them—— Lo, the step of that dead man upon the turret-stair!

The words she had answered so contemptuously when spoken that morning by Clement, and which had intruded upon her more than once that night, again seemed to ring within her ears: "I have heard that spirits will sometimes re-enact the self-same scene which was fatal

to them, or to those dear to them in this life, and in the self-same place." Was she to see her husband once more stagger and fall yonder; and was his dead son indeed coming up to succour him as before, and to cast again upon her that look of hatred and execration which had never faded from her memory? As though to resolve her doubts, the half-face of the moon shone forth for a moment free from the hanging clouds, and her straining eyeballs beheld the little door burst open from within, and on the threshold Raymond Clyffard standing as in life, with his arm outstretched, and pointing to herself, while she heard his voice thundering like the tramp of doom, "Thou devil, I come for *thee*!"

At that dread sight and sentence, reason forsook her seat in the wretched woman's brain, and she fled up the roof at speed, shrieking with maniac mirth. Her features, still distorted with the passion evoked by her late struggle, and crowned with frenzied hate, were a spectacle to freeze a brave man's blood, but not to evoke his pity. Raymond knew what had happened at a glance, but it moved him scarce at all, in comparison with that which he did *not* see.

"Rue, Rue!" cried he. "Where art thou, Rupert? Answer, Rue, Rue!"

The echoing walls that stood about the skylight returned, "Rue, Rue!" The hearse-like woods replied in fainter notes; the solemn voices of the night that dwelt in Ribble Fell gave dimly back, "Rue, Rue!" The startled owl, taking its noiseless flight from the ivied tower close by, seemed to give like reply.

"Rupert, good Rupert, it is I, your brother Raymond!"

"Look in the garden; look in the rose-garden," cried a mocking tongue; and two fair hands were clapped together in triumph; and again that laugh rang forth, which, to the ear that has once heard it, makes all laughter have an evil sound for ever.

Sick at heart, Raymond hurried to that part of the battlements which he knew commanded the spot in question, and looked down. As he did so, a prostrate

figure upon the gravel walk beneath raised himself with difficulty upon one arm, and looked up at him. Brother's face met brother's for the first time after years of absence, and after what separates brother from brother far more than years—far more than broadest seas—suspicion, injustice, wrong."

"Ray."

"Rue."

Little indeed to say; but when heart speaks to heart, there is no need of words! Each loving monosyllable breathed forth as much of trust revived, enmity forgotten, kinship and old affection brought to mind, as could have been contained in a volume.

"I come, I come," cried Raymond passionately; then dashed down the turret-stair, while the poor gibbering wretch, who was once his deadly foe, besought him in vain to tarry and take from her the shroud which she had wrought so cunningly for Rupert's self.

From the rose-garden, along the broad moonlit terrace, men carried the young Master of Clyffe into the house, which would still be his for a little time. There was a fire in the library, where Mildred, even then, was sitting with her sleeping child and Lucy (for she had not dared to retire to rest that night), and so they laid in there. A doctor brought by Raymond for quite another purpose, was at the Hall, and did what could be done for the dying man. It was a question of an hour, more or less of life, he said; if the patient had been previously insane, that was not the case now; the shock which had given him his death-blow had, strange as it might seem, restored his reason. Mildred remembered well, when Rupert had suffered from that fall, on the night of his father's death, what a change for the better had been worked in his mental ailment, which began to develop itself anew only as he grew strong. She tended him now as of yore, although in circumstances so far different; and as she sponged away from his broad brow, so cruelly marred, the blood that still welled slowly forth from his life-springs, his blue eyes swimming in painless tears seemed to beg of her forgiveness.

"I think," said Raymond tenderly, "that my dear brother wishes to say something to you, Mildred, alone."

A look of affectionate gratitude stole over the face of the dying man.

"No, no, Ray," murmured he; "we have been apart too long: stay you with her. We three—and yes, her child."

Then all the rest withdrew save William Cator, who, shaking his head in token of resolution not to interrupt, but, at the same time, not to leave those four, took up his quarters noiselessly upon the door-step, like a dog on watch. Except the low moan of the wind upon the terrace-walk without, there was not a sound to be heard; and the only light came from the wood-fire, which slept and awoke by fits—now shining full upon some battered breastplate or lance-head, with its tattered and moth-eaten pennant, now flickering out upon the heraldic panes, and calling into light the weird, fantastic form of bird or beast—now sinking into semi-darkness, more suggestive of those strange surroundings still.

"I am dying, Ray," began the Master of Clyffe calmly, "and can see nothing clearly with my outward eyes; but the inward sight which has been so long denied me, is very clear. It seems to me, brother, that I see myself for the first time. Selfish—hush!" said he with grave pathos, and holding up one white transparent finger—"I know it—self-seeking, self-indulgent from the first. From the very first, I say. This was the madness, and no other, which I drew in with my mother's milk. My father had it before me; and his before him; and all the Clyffards yonder, whether they lived mad or sane. The motto of our house writ on that foolish scroll there is nothing to the purpose; it should be 'Self—Self—Self.' From the cradle I was taught how great a thing it was to be the Master of Clyffe—one of yon dull, stern folks, by whose hands, I think, no seed of good was ever planted—so great, that hardly could one grow to such a height. Nature herself was jealous of us, and had interposed an obstacle. We were so high and strong, we Clyffards, because we called a handful of the great round earth our

own for a few consecutive years in the vast sum of time—we were so prosperous, I say, that out of jealousy, or, mayhap, fear, the powers of Heaven had laid upon us a special burden. This I was given to know by hirelings, but not directly; I gathered it from hints and songs which, pieced together with scraps of vulgar rumour heard without the walls, eked out the story which my father's gloom corroborated. Then, dwelling upon this, and never for one moment suffering my thoughts to stray from him whom it concerned—me, Rupert Clffyard—I grew from worse to worse, until the prophecy fulfilled itself. I think, if Mildred here had loved me, this fate—if I can call that fate which I myself had helped to bring upon myself—might have been delayed—delayed, kind, generous woman, not averted. Had we married—for one who is pledged to death, dear brother, may say so much—I should only have loved her through myself. Sooner or later—but mark how, even upon the very threshold of the grave, the habit rules! And yet, for once, although I deal with 'I' and 'me,' it is not for my own sake, Ray. Dear brother and sweet sister, since God has willed it so, think not I take advantage of my neighbourhood to death, as some have done, to chide you, or to pack your memories with recipes I have not used myself, of how to live. Chiding would ill become these lips, indeed, even if you deserved it—you, than whom I know no worthier souls upon this earth. For yourselves, you have no need of warning—kind, unselfish, wise. But for that little one—and others, if Heaven should send them—bearing this name of Clyffard, and brought up in this stately place, oh keep them from this bane of 'Self—Self—Self'—the only forerunner of doom which in truth haunts Clyffe Hall—the only curse that clings to this unhappy house."

He paused for breath with pained and labouring chest, while Mildred, kneeling by his side, in silence wept; and Raymond, holding the cold hand in his, and chafing it in vain, dropped man's rare tears. Then, midst the hush, there came a groan from nigh the door.

"What is that?" asked Rupert, hastily.

"It is I," said Cator, rising and approaching the couch with downcast looks.

"Away, thou villain!" ejaculated the dying man.

"Oh, not so," interposed Raymond; "he always meant us well, both he and his sister Lucy."

"Away, away!" continued Rupert passionately, and covering his eyes with his hand.

"It is only natural, Sir," sighed the poor servant man; we are known by the company we keep; and I have kept the worst. Heaven bless you, Master, though you love me not. When we two meet again, you will know me better." With that he moved away, cut to his faithful heart.

"Dear Rupert," whispered Mildred, "he loved your father dearly, served him dutifully; hired himself to basest masters to help your Uncle Cyril all he could."

"Away, away!" still murmured the feeble voice, quivering with rage as much as with its feebleness.

"Do no man wrong, dear Rue, at such a time as this," said Raymond gravely. "He did his best, indeed he did, however it may seem, for you, for me, for all of us."

The voice was silent, but the lips still moved the same, "Away, away!"

"He watched by night and day to guard my child and me," urged Mildred piteously.

"Did he guard *thee*?" cried Rupert with sudden energy. "Then call him back. Cator, I know not whether you be a true man or no, but give me your hand; and if I do not grasp it, it is my lack of strength forbids. I thank you; and if I have anything to forgive you, I forgive it."

Cator carried the thin fingers to his lips, and kissed them like one who touches sacramental bread, then reverentially withdrew.

"Where is that man's mistress?" inquired Rupert, when the serving man had left the room. "I will forgive her too. Is she not Mildred's aunt?"

"She is out of the reach of forgiveness and punishment also," returned Raymond solemnly.

"Is she dead, then?"

"No, Rue, worse than that. A terrible retribution has overtaken her; her mind has left her."

"Alas, poor wretch! You may well say, brother"—here a shudder shook the wasted limbs—"that is worse than death."

"You have not told us, Rue—and we must know," said Raymond, hastening to interpose—"how came you in this plight? Did the unhappy woman in her madness"—he hesitated, and stole a look towards his wife—her niece.

"No, Raymond; I fell backward of myself."

"Thank God!" cried Mildred fervently; and from the depths of Raymond's chest came a great sigh of relief. Then over Rupert's livid and wasted face there stole a smile which made it almost young again.

"Remember, brother, for the sake of all who follow you, the warning which I spoke—the only legacy poor Rupert has to leave. Self—self—self: that is the Clyffard's curse. And if your children ask to hear its history, then tell them mine."

CHAPTER XLVII.

EVER AFTERWARDS.

THE seed which Rupert sowed with his last breath in that good ground, his brother Raymond's heart, took full effect. From the moment that he began to rule, a new system made itself felt wherever his influence extended. Over all the lands of Clyffe there was now a master indeed—not merely a sluggard nursing dreams of his family greatness, or creating for himself imaginary giants, which in the end became too strong for him and his. He was not feared as all his race had been before him ; nor was he merely respected like his father—he was revered, honoured, loved. Time never hung heavy on *his* hands. Generation after generation of misrule, of rule by deputy, or of *laissez aller*, had left him quite enough to do on fell and field, in farm and hamlet. The spreading park was no longer a shut paradise to all but some half-a-dozen human creatures. The Hall, as soon as the long days of mourning were accomplished, was set in order as it had never been before, and did not want for guests. The county families welcomed with open arms—as though he were some repentant prodigal of their own house—a Clyffard that was neither abandoned nor a recluse. He was as good a sportsman as the best of them ; but he had learned to live not only for his own pleasures. I do not say that in all this Raymond Clyffard was seconded by his wife, because that word would do her wrong ; not

that she took the lead in anything wherein it becomes a woman to follow or not to meddle, but that she had a far harder part to act than he, and played it to perfection.

She was a Carr to start with, one of an upstart race, despised wherever known, and well known in those parts, and no mere town-bred folks can understand what a barrier to getting on with proud and simple country gentry is a misfortune of that sort. Moreover, though much was kept concealed, it was understood that to the machinations of Grace Clyffard—a hopeless, dangerous lunatic for life, but well and carefully tended in a place far other than that to which she had doomed poor Rupert—it was understood, I say, that Mildred's aunt and uncles had worked great evil to the family into which she had married, an act in itself almost unpardonable, even if such had not been the case; for eagles, said the country code of moral obligation, should match with eagles, and not choose their mates out of the nests of sparrowhawks. Nay, even her own household murmured something of this, and remembering what the last Lady of Clyffe had been, at first submitted to her niece's rule with an ill grace. But Mildred had been used to be misjudged when friendless, and now she had her husband's love to strengthen her, and hold her firm before the eyes of all. Until they saw her aright, she was content to do her duty, and waive recompense from others. But it came at last. One by one she gained her foes all over to her her own side, by bribes that none with hearts can be so stubborn as to resist for long—humility, good-will, and a desire to please, that would not be denied, but rose again, no matter how cast back, with smiles and pleading hands. Through all her trials, she wore the crown of Christian charity undimmed; not only that whose warm and substantial rays give comfort to the poor—although the path betwixt the Hall was well worn now by many an almoner's feet, and her own sweet face was as familiar to the eyes of her sick folk as was the flower in their window—but that which fosters peace, and trust, and love, and from whose genial light shrink scandal and oppression, as the nightshade shuns the sun. "Since I could win over

Cator"—her ally only for another's sake, but hating her and hers, and jealous of her, with all the strength of his stubborn nature—"surely," thought she, "I can propitiate those who are merely my foes." And she was right; for to all but the veriest cowards it is hard indeed to fight when none resist; and, in the end, peace and good-will always remain the conquerors.

Be sure that Raymond and his wife, thus careful of their conduct to their kind, did not forget their friends. Walter Dickson, down at Sandby, had soon no need to smuggle for the remainder of his days, although he did it to the last, from love and habit; while young Richard Brock married Phœbe (which was to have been such a long engagement, because he had no boat of his own, poor fellow) that same summer. The faithful servant who, for the Clyffards' sake had borne so long his burden of contumely and disgrace, reaped as great reward as he could be persuaded to accept, in holding the same fields and farm his fathers held; there he worked and prospered, but a solitary and well-nigh friendless man; for the new times at Clyffe were not to his taste; the master and his wife unbent, he thought, too much, and lost in dignity what they gained in mere love and honour; moreover, Cator, like his new mistress, had old antipathies and mistrusts to contend against, which, to one of his unpliant spirit, were insuperable. At his own special desire, Lucy remained at the Hall (a great domestic power, and especially in all things pertaining to the nursery), for he was unwilling that she should suffer through his misfortune, and felt fully equal to bearing his own burden, the carrying of which, indeed, it must be confessed, was not entirely displeasing to his sombre nature. From time to time, however, he kept in play the fountain of kindly feeling, which lay too deep within him for ordinary occasions to evoke, by coming to see the master, who received him always with the most cordial greeting, and to dandle Miss Milly, until that young lady grew too big for such attentions. She was not at all repulsed by his grim and forbidding features (as had been the case with Mr. Stevens of evil memory), but

caressed him with a child's unerring instinct for what is really estimable, as though he had been the Apollo Belvidere.

Another countenance, not remarkable for personal beauty, was also always welcome to Milly, as honey and the honeycomb, which latter it so greatly resembled. "Lor, godpapa," she would exclaim, alluding to the ravages of small-pox, "what a funny face you've got!"

"Yes, my dear," would the good lieutenant make answer, enjoying the child's naïve remark, while it chilled her parents' veins; "it's *very expensively carved*, is it not, Milly?"

But godmamma was even a greater favourite yet. The Careys had of course been informed of all that had taken place at Cyffe, and of so much of Raymond's strange imprisonment as did not hazard discovery of the *Martin's Nest*. But at first, and indeed for many months, no invitation was issued from the Hall, even to friends so dear as they. When it did arrive at Lucky Bay, couched in the most affectionate terms that Raymond and Mildred could jointly pen, it could not be immediately accepted, for a reason as satisfactory as valid. Another stranger, very much smaller than Mr. Stevens, was expected shortly at the coastguard station, whom not even the sanguine lieutenant could suspect of being an Admiralty official. Of this promised joy, Mr. Carey wrote to Raymond jocosely, as men write to men, and yet with rapturous welcome of this coming child of his old age; while his wife wrote to Mildred in a very different strain, reminding her of a certain talk they two had held together when left alone at Pampas Cottage. "I then referred ungratefully enough to that prematurely autumnal life of mine, crowned though it was with love and plenty; and now kind Heaven, rewarding, as its manner is, ingratitude with unlooked-for blessing, vouchsafes me springtide. In a few weeks I hope to be a mother." So when the Careys paid their visit to the Hall at last, they brought with them an infant son, who bore the name of his father's friend and host. The next year they came again, and every year, and more than once the Clyffards

returned their visit, but not to Lucky Bay. Somehow or other the lieutenant's merits did get acknowledged at last ; and although he never got a ship which would have separated him from his darling child, out of whose sight the affectionate old fellow could scarcely bear to be, he got promotion and increase of income, such as enabled him to meet his growing charges, and even to put by for little Ray.

"I know how it all comes," whispered Mrs. Carey, with eyes that swam in tears, to her beloved friend, as true in her prosperity as in her days of bitter trial ; "I know who jogs the elbows of these gentlemen in office. We might have waited long enough for this, but for your husband's influence."

"But not one word!" cried Mildred, sealing her quivering lips with a dainty finger. "If you owe him any thanks he is best paid by silence. Let the lieutenant credit these people with it all ; it is always good to think well of those we serve. To hear a sailor praise the sea-powers that be, is rare indeed—and 'By the Lord Harry' too !—— No, not one word, dear Marion, if you love us."

So time drew on, touching with mellow and tender tints the natures of Raymond and of Mildred, but leaving the core of youth untouched. As though to make up for this stormy spring-time, the summer of their lives was well-nigh cloudless. Perhaps, in the wife's secret heart, there may have lurked a desire for a son, whose life should have borne witness against evil tradition, and rescued his family name from superstitious slur. But this was not to be. What could be done to chase away the shadows from Clyffe Hall, however, was done, and that effectually. It was so given to hospitality, that the very idea of an apparition, the origin of which could not be clearly traced to supper, would have been scouted. At Christmas-time, in particular, there really was no accommodation for a ghost ; the rooms were full. Many a glorious game of "Hide and Seek" had Milly and Ray Carey, with a host of happy romping boys and misses, in the once shunned secret chambers of the Hall, while the echoes

of their childish laughter filled the gloomy corridors ; often, on the walls of the long gallery, the frowning Clyffards were made unwilling witnesses of "Hunt the Hare" and "Blind Man's Buff." The most favourite place to hide in was, I think, that very chamber within the chimney of the Blue Room, where Grace Clyffard had concealed herself (for it had an entrance from without), and caused her brother Clement to pass so uncomfortable a night.

As Milly grew up, there were of course festivities of another kind, of which her old playmate was no less constantly a partaker—"Ray" still to her, although to the world, especially the Admiralty (who kept their eye upon him, by the Lord Harry, as they had done upon his father), he was Lieutenant Raymond Carey, R.N., a very rising young officer, who had been mentioned in dispatches. At last the day arrived when playmate and lover led up—as leaf and blossom to fruit—to husband. There were many, of course, to call the match unequal ; some even to say that after all there must be something wrong in the Clyffard blood which led them to ally themselves so strangely. But since Miss Mildred had decided thus for herself ; and since the marriage in question had been the most cherished wish of her parents' hearts for years ; and since the scruples of the bridegroom's father (who was, however, proud and obstinate against it, much beyond what had been looked for) were finally overcome—perhaps, after all, the alliance was not so monstrous and deplorable. At all events, it took place ; and none even of those, I have understood, who had spoken against it with the greatest reprobation, declined to accept the invitations that were issued for the ball.

If any gloom still clung to the family mansion of the Clyffards, the last shade of it must have been expelled upon that occasion. It was observed by one old county fogey (who made a reputation out of the remark for the evening) that night had not so been turned into day since Rupert Clyffard's time ; and it was certainly a most brilliant and joyous gathering. The

ancient lieutenant and his still comely wife, in spite of the "scheming" with which they were credited by the great folk who had marriageable sons, won all hearts.

Ere the bride had departed that morning she had embraced them both with an affection scarcely less than that she exhibited for her own beloved parents. "Look here, godpapa," said she, pointing to the bridal veil, which was indeed a miracle of beauty, and worthy of the fair face it covered. "This is a present, sent—from whence do you think? Now guess. No, not aloud; I must whisper it in your ear. It came last night, from some old friends of papa and mamma—at Sandby."

"At Sandby!" cried the old gentleman, throwing up his hands in horror. "Your parents, my dear, kept very bad company in those parts." He took the delicate fabric between his fingers and thumb, and ruefully delivered himself of this opinion: "Smuggled! by the Lord Harry, smuggled!"

THE END.

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